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THE SEA OWL; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.

A Romance of Piracy on the American Coast, and a Companion Story to "The Pirate Priest," and "Cutlass and Cross."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT," "WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



THEN IN THE LADY CAPTAIN'S RINGING VOICE CAME THE WORDS: "DROP THAT HATCH MUTINEERS AND BACK TO THE FORECASTLE, FOR I HAVE OPENED THE TRAP IN THE CABIN AND WILL HURL THIS LAMP INTO THE POWDER-MAGAZINE!"

The Sea Owl;

OR,

The Lady Captain of the Gulf.

A Romance of Piracy on the American Coast,
and a Companion Story to "The Pirate
Priest," and "Cutlass and Cross."

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CHAPTER I.

BRANDED BY HIS OWN HAND.

A MAN sat alone in the cabin of a small lug-
ger.

It was night, and the cabin lamplight fell full
upon him, revealing a form of superb physical
beauty and grace, combined with strength,
and a face that was full of expression and
power.

Each feature seemed perfect, and no one
would have said that he was otherwise than a
very handsome man, and only the closest reader
of human nature would have detected evil and
treachery beneath the mask of noble manhood
which he wore.

He was dressed in the garb of a common sea-
man, yet looked the officer beneath a dis-
guise.

The vessel's cabin was handsomely fitted up,
with many articles of luxury, comfort and
beauty upon every hand, and, but for the war-
like weapons here and there visible, might have
been mistaken for a lady's boudoir aboard ship.

Ottomans, Persian rugs, easy divans and other
furniture, no two pieces alike, were visible here
and there, while crossed cutlasses, pistols, dag-
gers and a stack of arms occupied positions
where they could be readily grasped in time of
need.

"Well, I am tired of being cooped up here in
this smuggler craft when, now that the die is
cast and I am branded by my own hand an out-
law, I can daringly raise the black flag and
skim the seas as a pirate."

"The beautiful Rita is a charming compan-
ion, and does all she can to make my time pass
pleasantly until her father's return; but I feel,
for all that, that I am little more than a pris-
oner, and I long for the coming of the smuggler
captain, when this hiding away in a lagoon will
end."

"Once I tread the deck of a gallant craft, I
will begin my revenge against Bradford Carr—
the man who, as my rival, has brought me to
what I now am—and I shall lower the proud
head of the haughty beauty, Maud Brandt, by
making her a pirate's bride."

"Ha! ha! what a sweet revenge will be mine
once I raise the black flag above my decks, and
I will be even happy in the carrying out of my
plans to strike at my rival and my love— Ah!
Rita, you are welcome, for my thoughts are
moody to-night."

And the man turned his gaze upon one who
just then descended the companionway and en-
tered the cabin.

The one who entered was a maiden, whose
years had perhaps reached twenty, and whose
face was more attractive by its brilliant eyes
and fearlessness, than through its beauty.

Still it was a countenance to command re-
spect, to win idolatrous love from men, and yet
to cause fear of giving her reason for anger or
hatred.

Her voice was low and winning, yet full of
strength did she care to raise it to a higher key,
her form was rounded and graceful and her
manner fascinating, while she seemed to possess
a refinement that looked out of place on a lug-
ger, which the man's remarks had given the idea
was an outlaw craft.

"My spy reports a vessel in the offing, head-
ing in-shore, Mr. Keys, and it must be my
father with your craft," said the maiden, and
her tone and look was one of regret.

"Ha! I grant that it be, for I long to be
away," he cried, and then seeing a look of pain
flash over her face at his words, he added, ten-
derly:

"Not that I am anxious to leave your sweet
companionship, Rita, but I long to bury thought
in busy action, and to get a chance to strike at
my foes."

"You are revengeful," she said, calmly.

"Yes, I am toward those who have brought
ruin upon me," he answered fiercely.

"Was the brand of outlawry upon you not
placed there by your own hand, Mr. Keys?"
came the question.

He started at her words and gazed fixedly into
her superb eyes, while an angry flush passed over
his face.

But checking any anger he might have felt,
he said, in a cool way:

"You shall know just why I was forced to
brand myself a Cain and an outlaw, Rita, and
also why I now thirst to hoist the pirate flag."

"You are aware that I am the son of a

wealthy planter upon the Mississippi river, but
you are not aware that my love of cards caused
me to draw so heavily upon my father, to pay
my debts, that I was forced to seek some heiress
to form an alliance with to cancel the indebted-
ness."

"That heiress I found in Miss Maud Brandt,
whose plantation home is some leagues from here
on these shores."

"I met her at the Blue Anchor Inn, the old
Spanish mansion, which, once the haunt of
pirates, was turned into a summer resort by an
enterprising Yankee, whose guests are the aris-
tocratic people of this coast country."

"I know the place well and the people who
frequent it, for many of the ladies wear jewels
and laces which my father has smuggled," was
the cool reply.

"Doubtless, sweet Rita; but to my story:
"At the Blue Anchor Inn I met the lovely
heiress, Maud Brandt, and she is the richest
lady in the South, and the most beautiful I ever
looked upon."

"She was engaged, however, to Soule Ra-
velle, a young planter of great wealth whom
she hardly knew, for the two had been pledged
in childhood; but for this I did not care."

"At the home of her father, Colonel Brandt,
was a young Marylander, the tutor of Maud's
boy-brother, Irving, and I could see that she
loved the tutor, as he did her."

"But neither did I care for that, and began
my plot, with the aid of a friend, Chester
Granger, who was my slave because he owed
me money."

"I laid a plot into which I led both Ravelle
and the tutor, whose name was Bradford Carr."

"I wished to get rid of Ravelle, for he was
engaged to Maud, had made his will in her
favor, as I knew, and I owed him largely."

"I wished to get rid of the tutor because the
heiress loved him, and he was a dangerous man,
as I had reason to know."

"Well, my plot was successful, for Ravelle
was killed, and Bradford Carr was accused of
his murder, tried and sentenced."

"Yes, I heard of the whole affair," said Rita,
in the same soft tone in which she had before
spoken.

"But Bradford Carr escaped, through the aid
of Palafox the Pirate I believe; and the vessel
which he took passage on was captured by Bern-
ardo the Buccaneer, and all on board put to death
except several priests, one of whom had been
killed, and the tutor, assuming his robes, was
spared, but taken on the outlaw craft as chap-
lain—some old witch having told Bernardo that
he must have a padre on his ship to meet with
success."

"I have heard this, and that the supposed
padre, Mr. Carr, won the crew over, seized the
vessel, and thus became known as the Pirate
Priest, though he in reality used his vessel to
hunt down pirates," remarked the maiden, who
listened with the deepest attention.

"Oh, yes: the man had been educated for the
priesthood, and was a student, I believe, in
Baltimore, when he saved the life of Colonel
Brandt, who brought him South with him."

"He scoured the seas as the Pirate Priest, how-
ever, and, to do him justice, is a thorough sea-
man and a brave man; but my old friend,
Chester Granger, who had also turned pirate,
attempted to capture the padre buccaneer, but
got caught, turned State's evidence against me,
and I was thrown into jail, tried for the mur-
der of Ravelle, found guilty, and sentenced to
die on the gallows."

"As I told you and your father, Rita, the
night that you dragged me from the waves into
your skiff when I was drowning, I escaped by
killing the negro keeper and wounding the jail-
er; and here I am, awaiting the return of your
father, who will bring me a vessel in which I
can make a fortune on the high seas, and at
the same time reap revenge upon Bradford
Carr."

"And Miss Brandt?" asked Rita, in a voice
hardly audible.

"Oh! I shall lower her proud head by mak-
ing her my bride, after all."

"That will be my sweetest revenge," and the
man's face became almost devilish in its look of
malignant joy at the thought.

Rita sighed, bit her full red lips almost
viciously, and rising, said quickly:

"I will see if there is any other news about
the sail in the offing, for I sent the man back to
the mouth of the lagoon."

"Ah, yes! and I pray that it be your father
with my vessel," answered Barton Keys, the
fugitive from justice, and self-confessed mur-
derer, rising and following her to the deck.

Upon reaching the deck all was dark and dis-
mal about them, excepting the stars above, re-
flecting their sparkle in the waters below.

The lugger, a trim-looking craft, lay at an-
chor in the middle of a small basin, walled
around with cypress trees, whose branches were
festooned with the gray moss common to the
Gulf shores.

Out of the basin led innumerable bayous, or
lagoons, which formed a network for leagues,
and through some of them vessels could be
towed, by a roundabout course back to the
Gulf.

All was stillness there on the lugger, but the
splash of the alligator and the shriek of a night-
bird were heard shoreward.

The basin was as smooth as a mill-pond, not
a ripple disturbing its surface, though a good
breeze fanned the tree-tops.

As the man and maiden stood looking out
over the dark scene, toward the bayou that led
to the Gulf, a boat suddenly came in sight.

It was a small skiff and held a single occu-
pant.

"Ho the skiff!" cried the maiden, raising her
soft voice to a high and stern pitch one would
not have believed it capable of.

"The Sea Owl's Spy," came the answer from
the occupant of the skiff, and a moment after
the man clambered over the high sides of the
lugger and stood before Rita, the smuggler's
daughter.

CHAPTER II.

THE PIRATE'S PLOT.

THE man who confronted Rita on the lugger's
deck was a tall, lithe fellow, attired in sailor
costume.

"Well, Leon, what of the vessel in the off-
ing?" asked the maiden.

"It was the schooner of Palafox the Pirate,
senorita," answered the man, speaking with a
Spanish accent.

The light from the cabin falling upon the faces
of Rita and Barton Keys, showed a look of joy
come upon that of the maiden, while the fugi-
tive from justice frowned and bit his lips.

"Then it was not my father returning, as Mr.
Keys had hoped?"

"No, senorita, and it may be weeks yet, be-
fore the Sea Owl returns," answered the sea-
man.

"True, and I will improve the time, lady, if
you will be good enough to aid me," said Barton
Keys.

"I will do all in my power, senor, to aid my
father's guest," was the reply.

"Thank you, and I will need the lugger and
the assistance of a few good men, while, know-
ing good Leon here, as I do, I will ask him to
serve me well and his reward shall be ample."

"I am at the service of the senor, if such is
the will of my captain's daughter," responded
Leon.

"It is my will that you do as the Senor Keys
desires, and as he wishes the services of more
men, Leon, you had better start at once for the
rendezvous of the other lugger."

"There is no hurry, senorita, for the men;
but I will ask Leon to get a small sail-skiff ready
with provisions for a day or so, and be ready to
accompany me along the coast to-morrow at
dawn."

Rita started at his words and asked quickly:

"Where would you go, senor?"

"To the Brandt Plantation."

"Ha! would you dare go there?"

"Yes."

"You will go to your death."

"I think not, after you have given me your
aid in disguising me."

"But, while Leon prepares for our little voy-
age, come with me to the cabin and you shall
know my plot."

Without reply Rita followed her outlaw guest
once more into the lugger's cabin, and seating
himself at the little table, under the full glare
of the lamp, while the maiden threw herself upon
a divan back in the shadows, he said:

"You are aware of my desire for revenge
upon Bradford Carr and Maud Brandt, Rita?"

"Yes, Senor Keys."

"Call me by the name your father gave me—
that of Barto, for it maddens me to hear the
one I have disgraced," he said bitterly.

"As Senor Barto pleases," was the reply.

"Well, a brilliant idea has crossed my mind,
by which I can get ample revenge upon the
man who is now dwelling in honor at Brandt
Plantation, again the tutor of that reckless
young Brandt, and the pledged husband of the
beautiful Maud, while I, his rival, am a fugitive
from the gallows."

"I am listening, Senor Barto," said Rita, as
the man paused.

"My plot is to destroy the reputation of
Bradford Carr forever, and make him suffer
while living, the agony of the damned who are
dead."

"You are almost savage in your hatred,
senor," and Rita spoke with a shudder.

"I am toward those who have wronged me."

"But you did not explain to me how it was
that the Senor Carr wronged you?"

"He has stolen from me my bride."

"Ah! did you love her so dearly then?"

"Yes, and no, for I have never loved any
woman, I believe, though she is all that can
make a man idolize her."

"But I had formed my plans to get her, and
I was thwarted by Bradford Carr, who, in ex-
posing me, made me what I am now forced to
become, and for this I hate him."

"Now I shall go with Leon to the Brandt
Plantation, after you have thoroughly disguised
me, and deliver to Bradford Carr a letter."

"A letter, and from whom?"

"Purporting to be from your father, the Sea
Owl, offering, if he will leave Brandt Planta-

tion, and give up its heiress forever, to let him go free; but if not, threatening to kidnap her, pillage and burn the house, and hang him to the yard-arm."

"This is a fearful threat, señor."

"Yes, but it may force him to depart, and I will have a spy on his track to see that he never returns, while the field will be left open to me to secure Maud Brandt."

"Now you know my plot, Rita, and with the dawn I will leave in the skiff with Leon, and deliver the letter in person to Bradford Carr and get his answer."

"If he refuses, then will he have cause to curse the day that he was born."

"But how will you disguise me, fair Rita, for that man's eyes are piercing, and I will meet him face to face, while if I should happen to see that wild youngster, his pupil, I will have to undergo a scrutiny that will be terrible, for I never saw a boy of his years know so much."

"I will disguise you, señor, so that Love's eyes cannot recognize you even."

"But it will be Hate's eyes that I will have to face."

"Nor will the eyes of your worst foe know you."

"Good! now let us see what it will be?"

Rita arose and went into a state-room, soon returning with an armful of clothing.

These she laid out before the man, and placing upon the table a heavy false beard and wig, said simply:

"Now, señor, robe yourself in these clothes, and then I will hide your face from view."

Leaving the cabin she went on deck, and upon her return found the man arrayed in a sailor garb and awaiting her with some impatience of manner.

CHAPTER III. THE THREAT.

BRANDT PLANTATION was one of those grand old homes, built by the early Spanish settlers upon the Gulf shores, and a few of which still stand to-day.

Before the mansion was a small deep harbor, in which lay at anchor a beautiful sloop yacht, and several smaller sail-boats, while skiffs and row-boats were tied to the end of a wooden pier.

The grounds sloped gently down to the snowy beach, and were carpeted with velvety grass, while the lawn was shaded here and there with a massive live-oak or magnolia tree.

An ornamental mound, upon the summit of which was a miniature fort, an arbor of rustic beauty near the water, and flowerbeds scattered about, in the shape of stars and crescents, made the picture one of great beauty, with the white stucco walls of the mansion in the background.

Afar off, stretched the restless waters of Mississippi Sound, with the Gulf's blue waters beyond, and in the rear of the mansion were gardens and outbuildings, and then the dense magnolia forest, along the front of which was a line of white cabins, the quarters of the slaves.

The mansion was large and roomy, two stories high, and with several wings that added to its grandeur.

In the arbor overlooking the waters of the Sound, two persons were seated, the afternoon of the day following the scene on the smuggler lugger at anchor in the lagoon.

The one was a maiden that no one would have looked upon and not called most lovely, while her face portrayed a noble heart and soul worthy of her exquisite beauty.

Her companion was a man, tall of stature, broad-shouldered, fascinating in manner, and with a face that was full of conscious power.

The face was clean shaven, showing the perfection of every feature, and the eyes were dark, piercing, and portrayed in their glances the intellect and refinement of the man.

The maiden was Maud Brandt, the heiress, and the man was Bradford Carr, the young Divinity student, who, in accepting the tutorship of Irving Brandt, had had forced upon him a series of adventures, sorrows and joys that seldom fall to man's lot.

Driven to fly from the gallows, for a crime of which he had not been guilty, he had made himself master of a pirate vessel, and, though hunting down sea-outlaws, had become known as the Pirate Priest.

Through all, Maud Brandt and her noble young brother had believed him guiltless, and when at last Bradford Carr had proven himself so, by pointing out the guilty one, in Barton Keys, back to the grand old homestead he had gone in honor, and the heiress and beauty had become his promised wife.

After all the sorrows they had known, they now sat in the arbor happy in their love and hopeful for the future.

"Is that Irving in yonder skiff, Bradford?" asked Maud, as with her face turned down the coast, her eyes had fallen upon a small sailboat that had suddenly shot into view.

"No, for Irving went gunning, and there are two men in the boat," answered Bradford Carr, turning his eyes upon it.

"Who can they be?" asked Maud, a feeling of anxiety coming over her, for she had been so

accustomed to look for trouble of late, she expected it at all times.

"We shall soon know, Maud, for their destination is the Brandt haven," was the reply, and in silence the two watched the little boat come on its way, until it rounded the arm of land that formed the harbor, and ran alongside of the little pier.

Out of the boat then sprung a man, who came toward where Bradford Carr and the maiden sat, having evidently seen them there before he landed.

His companion remained in the boat and kept the boat to the pier with his hand, not seemingly caring to tie it there.

The man who advanced was bent in form, and upon his back was a hump, while his drooping shoulders caused his face to bend constantly toward the ground.

He was dressed in a sailor garb and wore a belt in which was stuck a pistol and a clasp-knife.

"Señor, I seek the Brandt Plantation?" he said in broken English.

"You have found the place you seek, my man," answered Bradford Carr, addressing the man in Spanish as his black beard, hair and accent suggested that he was of that nationality.

"It is here that the Señor Carr dwells, señor?"

"Yes, would you like to see him?"

"I would, if he is the one whom men called the Pirate Padre, señor!"

"Yes, he is one and the same, and I am Bradford Carr."

"You, señor?"

"So I said, my man."

"Then it is you that I seek."

"And what business have you with me?"

"To give you this letter, señor," and the man took out a sealed letter and handed it to the handsome young tutor, while Maud looked on in silence and in some alarm, wondering what the letter could be about and who the writer was.

Bradford Carr took the letter and with a firm hand broke the seal.

As he glanced over the contents his face paled, but otherwise no expression came to show his emotion.

What he read was as follows:

"On board the Sea Owl,
off Gulf Coast.

"To the SEÑOR BRADFORD CARR, the Pirate Priest:—
"SEÑOR:—The writer is your bitter foe, and the enemy of all you love, hence this letter.

"As your foe he will not allow you to dwell in happiness, and to hurt your heart to its inmost recess he commands you to give up the lady who is now your affianced wife.

"You are to forever leave Brandt Manor and Maud Brandt, going your way through life alone.

"If you obey, then all will be well, and your love for her will be proven by your giving her up.

"If you refuse I threaten, and you will find it no idle threat, for I am anxious and willing to carry out my determination.

"My threat is that I will visit Brandt Manor by night, kidnap your promised bride, and pillage and burn her home, killing you, her father and her brother before her eyes, and afterward force her to become my bride.

"Answer by bearer *y's*, if you will go and thus save Maud Brandt, and *no*, if you refuse.

"But if *no* is the response I receive, beware of the threat of
THE SEA OWL."

Twice did Bradford Carr read this letter through, and then he folded it up slowly, placed it in his pocket and said sternly:

"Tell your master that I will make no terms with him."

"There is some other answer, señor," said the man.

"Then bear it back, for emphatically I say *No*!"

"But, señor, you surely—"

"Silence, sir, and begone, or poor deformed creature that you are, I will hurl you beneath my feet and stamp out your accursed life."

The voice of Bradford Carr rung out like a trumpet, and his eyes fairly blazed as he gazed upon the man before him.

Apparently alarmed for his safety the deformed seaman shrunk back, and walked rapidly to his boat.

"Shove off, Leon, for that man is as dangerous as an enraged tiger and may detain us," said the messenger, springing into his boat.

"He refused to comply with your terms, señor, as I heard from his ringing words."

"Yes, Leon; but I have threatened, so let him beware," and Barton Keys, for he it was, took the tiller and headed out of the harbor, while Bradford Carr and Maud watched the skiff's departure, the maiden with a most anxious look upon her beautiful face, for her lover had firmly refused to show her the letter he had received, or to tell her of its contents, and it came to her heart that some dread evil was upon them, the nature of which it was beyond her power to fathom.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COMPACT WITH THE HUNCHBACK SAILOR.

A GLOOM had fallen upon the inmates of Brandt Manor, for Bradford Carr would not divulge the secret he held, of the mysterious letter, not even to Colonel Brandt or his handsome young pupil, but kept it locked in his own

heart, while his manner had become morose, and at times stern.

Some days after the visit of his disguised enemy, Bradford Carr had been seen from a window by Ellizette, the quadroon maid, of Maud Brandt, in conversation with a seaman, a mile down the coast.

Ellizette had called to her mistress and pointed out the young tutor, as he stood in a cove, talking to the man who had just landed in a boat.

Turning a spy-glass, which she always kept in her room, to amuse herself with by gazing at vessels far out on the waters, Maud started as she recognized in the person with Bradford Carr the tall hunchback that had brought him the letter that had so affected him.

"Oh! that I could hear as well as I can see through this glass, and thus learn the secret that Bradford Carr keeps from me, and which has changed his whole nature," she said, while tears dimmed her eyes.

As she spoke her lover sprung into the boat, and the stranger following, seized the oars and pulled out of sight of the maiden behind a wooded point of land.

Walking along the shore, as was often his wont, Bradford Carr had descried the skiff out upon the waters, and heading in, as though to land near him.

His keen eyes at once recognized the hunchback bearer of the letter, and he came to a halt to await the man's landing, for out over the waters came the hail:

"Ho, señor! lay to, for I would speak with you."

In a short while the man took in his little sail, and seizing his oars, beached the skiff.

Springing out he saluted politely and said:

"I visit you again, señor."

"And what message bring you this time, fellow?" sternly asked the tutor.

"I come on my own account this time, señor."

"Ha! what mean you?"

"Just what I say, señor."

"Who are you?"

"One who does not wish to see the threat in the Sea Owl's letter carried out."

"Ah! you knew the contents of the letter then?"

"Yes, señor."

Perhaps you can tell me why I have gained the enmity of your master, the Sea Owl?"

"My captain, señor, not my master."

"Well, either you please; but tell me, if you know, why he is my bitter foe?"

"As the Pirate Priest, señor, you may have done him much harm."

"True, I struck at pirates and smugglers alike; but now why are you here?"

"To serve you, señor."

"Indeed! how can that be?"

"My heart is not so deformed as my body, señor, and I have mercy for the innocent."

The man spoke with feeling, and Bradford Carr was touched by the pathos in his voice, and the sad look that came into his eyes, and said quickly:

"Ah! say you so, my man? Then you are not as bad as your calling would make you appear?"

"No, señor, though I am an outlaw, I am not one to make war upon the innocent."

"You have suffered much in the past, for I know of your sorrows, and I wish to serve you from two motives."

"Name them?"

"First, señor, answer me if you intend to give up the Lady Maud as the Sea Owl demands?"

"Assuredly not."

"He has made a fearful threat, señor, if you do not."

"So be it, he will find one ready to meet him when he attempts to carry it out."

"But he will come with a score of men at his back, señor."

"So let him."

"You are a brave man, señor; but you would fall, and the Lady Maud would become the Sea Owl's captive, and this is why I would serve you and her, for I would hate to see you slain, and the more to behold her in the power of my captain."

"You are kind at heart; but what is your other motive in serving me?"

"To serve myself, señor."

"Ah! I half-guessed it: you want gold?"

"Yes, señor, a little."

"I am poor, and can give you but little, served you me ever so well."

"Poor, and yet you were the Pirate Priest?"

"Yes, so called, but no pirate, and the money gained by pirate prizes I turned over to my crew, for I wanted none thus earned."

"Well, señor, I needed only a few hundreds, not for myself, but to buy over several of my comrades who are for sale for gold."

"As for myself, I will get my pay in seeing the Sea Owl hung up to the yard-arm."

"Why, he is your captain."

"True, and yet my foe, señor."

"He trusts you."

"Yes, and that is why I can betray him."

"You are a strange man."

"I am revengeful, senor, and when you refused so bravely to accept the Sea Owl's terms, you won my respect, and I determined to save you and the beautiful lady, while at the same time I avenge myself."

"You hate your captain then, for some wrong he has done you?"

"I do, senor."

"And would betray him?"

"I will."

"Can you?"

"Yes, senor, if you are willing to take the risks."

"I am willing to risk my life, my man, to free the seas of a man so vile as your captain has the name of being."

"Then, senor, I will betray him into your hands."

"But how can this be done, for I have no force near that I can control?"

"None is needed, senor, for you can do all with the aid of myself and others."

"What others?"

"Those of the Sea Owl's crew who are his foes, like me, and who will aid in his capture for a consideration."

"But I have no money with which to bribe them, or at furthest, only a few hundreds of dollars."

"Senor, a few hundred will be sufficient; but it is more than gold the men ask that aid me."

"What then?"

"A pardon for their crimes."

"I have no power to pardon them."

"Ah, senor, if you will pledge yourself that all who aid you in getting the Sea Owl and his swift sailing lugger into your hands, shall have a pardon for their crimes, they will gladly give up their evil lives, as I will."

"I think I can promise this, for the Government will grant my request."

"A thousand thanks, senor; I will accept your pledge and make known my plan."

"Well, my man—but let us go beyond that point of land, for I do not wish to be seen with you, and here we are in full view of any one in the upper rooms of the mansion."

"You know best, senor," answered the man, and getting into the skiff the hunchback rowed to the spot beyond the view of Maud, who had been so anxiously watching from her window.

Again landing the hunchback said:

"Now, senor, my plan is to tell the Sea Owl that you have agreed to buy him off from carrying out his threat, for frankly, he sent me here to see if I could not entrap you."

"You are certainly honest."

"I am toward you, senor, but not toward the Sea Owl."

"I will tell him that you will come on board to make terms with him, if he will run the lugger into the harbor, say ten nights from this."

"Do you expect me to go alone on board the vessel?"

"Yes, senor, for you will find three-fourths of the crew ready to obey your call."

"You will enter the cabin and at once cover the Sea Owl with your pistol, for he will expect no danger among his crew, and I will rally my comrades about me and seize or cut down those who are true to the captain."

Bradford Carr was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"So be it, my man, I will take any risk to capture the Sea Owl and his craft."

"I am glad to hear you say so, senor, for now I will get my revenge; but, as our craft will fly light, as far as gold in her lockers is concerned, I will have to ask you to bring along what you can for the lads, senor."

"I will do so, my man," and the two parted. The hunchback to return to his boat and set sail, while Bradford Carr walked slowly back to Brandt Manor, his heart hopeful that he could ward off the evil which he had kept secret from all.

CHAPTER V. THE TRAP.

BRADFORD CARR had borne his dread in silence and in secret, after the visit of the hunchback bearer of the letter to him.

He did not wish to alarm Maud, or cause anxiety to her father and brother, and alone had intended to discover some place to thwart the Sea Owl, if in the end, he had really to give up the one he so dearly loved to her and those dear to her.

His heart was too anxious to permit him to rest, and each night he had stood on watch, to guard against, and it was no wonder, that with his anxiety and loss of rest he became moody and fretful.

After his compact with the hunchback sailor, he held hope, yet was still anxious, and nightly he walked the beach unable to rest, and the eyes of love watching him so closely felt that something had gone wrong with him, which they could not fathom.

At length the appointed night rolled round, and retiring early to his room, Bradford Carr waited until the rest of the family had followed his example, and then he walked out upon the moonlit lawn, keeping in the shadow of the magnolias and live-oak trees.

Halting in the shade of a grand old oak he gazed out over the waters, which were rippled by a four-knot breeze.

"The lugger is coming," he muttered, as his eyes fell upon a white sail out upon the waters.

Straight toward the harbor she came, and standing on beyond the arm of land that formed the little haven, laid her course on the next tack directly in toward the little pier.

Running astern of the Lady Maud, Irving Brandt's pretty yacht, the lugger's anchor was silently lowered and sail taken in, as though her commander did not wish to attract attention from the mansion.

Then a boat left the lugger's side and pulled noiselessly to the shore, one man being the only occupant.

"It is the hunchback sailor and he is coming for me," said Bradford Carr, and turning his gaze upon the wing, where were Maud's rooms, he said sadly:

"I risk much this night, my darling, for your sweet sake, and may Heaven in the end bring all round aright."

Little did he dream that at that moment, as he descended to the shore to meet the hunchback, that the eyes of Maud Brandt were then upon him.

"Ah, senor, you are here, I am glad to see," said the hunchback, recognizing the tutor as he came down the lawn slope to the beach.

"Yes, my man, I am here, as you are, true to promises made."

"And all works well, Senor Carr, for I told the Sea Owl that you had arranged to give him a large sum to buy him off, and he loves your gold more than he does his revenge against you."

"He holds no suspicion then?"

"Not the slightest."

"And the crew?"

"Two thirds of them are of my way of thinking, senor."

"Well, my man, I go with you, hoping that all is right; but you are to accompany me, remaining by my side in my interview with your chief, and I pledge you my word, that if treachery is intended toward me, be my fate what it may, I shall kill you on the instant I suspect you."

The man started slightly, but answered:

"This is hard, senor, that you suspect me; but you are at liberty to kill me if I prove treacherous."

"And I will, if in my power, mark my words, my man."

"Now row me on board the lugger," and Bradford Carr stepped into the little boat and was followed by the hunchback.

Out to the lugger the latter rowed, and the two went over the side, and advanced toward the cabin.

Bradford Carr cast his eyes over the craft and saw that she was of trim build, carried considerable canvas, and was evidently a fleet sailer.

About a dozen men were visible, standing along the high bulwark and gazing over at the pretty scene landward.

"Wait one minute, senor, and I will tell the captain you are here," said the hunchback, pausing at the cabin companionway.

"No, we will go down together, sir, so lead on," was the response.

"As you please, senor," and the hunchback motioned to Bradford Carr to go first.

"After you, sir," sternly said the tutor, and the hunchback saw that one hand grasped a weapon, so at once preceded him.

Into the cabin the two passed, Bradford Carr close on the heels of the seaman.

The one there to receive them was Rita Restel, the smuggler's daughter.

She looked strangely beautiful in her Mexican attire, and arose with a smile of greeting, as the two entered.

"The Senorita Restel, the Sea Owl's daughter, Senor Carr," said the hunchback, by way of introduction.

Bradford Carr was fairly dazzled.

He had expected to meet a grizzly old pirate, and this brilliant woman confronted him.

Thrown off his guard by the presence of a woman, he bowed low, with the courtly grace natural to him, though it was to the daughter of an outlaw, and the hunchback said quickly:

"Be seated, senor, and I will call Captain Restel from his state-room."

As he spoke he passed through the narrow gangway leading from the cabin, while Bradford Carr took the seat motioned to by Rita Restel.

As he did so the Girl Smuggler suddenly turned upon him, and leveling a pistol straight at his head, cried sternly:

"Senor Carr, you are my prisoner!"

"Submit quietly, and do not force me to kill you!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT TO SEA.

THAT Bradford Carr was wholly taken aback by the action and words of Rita Restel, his manner showed, for he made no movement, simply sitting in silent amazement, gazing upon the

maiden, whose hand was as firm as a rock, as it held the pistol leveled at him.

Had the hunchback been the one who had thus faced him, the young tutor would have risked the shot and sprung upon him.

But the hunchback had been foiled by the determination of Carr, to hold him responsible for treachery.

He knew that the tutor would kill him at the slightest suspicion that he had been led into a trap.

To get him on board the lugger was his determination, and this done, the tutor again thwarted him by forcing him to remain with him.

Rita Restel had heard what had passed upon the deck, and instantly discovered that the hunchback was caught in his own trap, so at once decided to aid him, and glided into the cabin, a pistol concealed in the folds of her dress.

It was a great relief to the hunchback to find her there, and he took advantage of it, to quickly depart, under pretense of calling Captain Restel, but really to summon aid.

To his amazement he saw that Rita had grasped the situation boldly, and had the victim at her mercy.

Instantly he seized a musket from a bracket over the state-room door, and pointing it at Bradford Carr, called out to the crew:

"Ho, men! to the rescue!"

Down the companionway sprang the lugger's men, and they were ready for action.

But Bradford Carr did not move, but sat in silence, gazing upon the maiden, whose face was flushed as she turned it toward the hunchback, and said, proudly:

"Captain Barto, there is your prisoner."

"Well, Sir Traitor, you have me in your power."

"But are you the Sea Owl?" quietly said Bradford Carr, showing no excitement.

"I am not, sir; but you shall know just who I am before very long," was the answer, no longer spoken with an accent.

Then turning to the maiden, he said:

"Senorita Restel, I thank you for your prompt service in my behalf."

"Now, men, secure this prisoner, and hold him here until my return."

With this the hunchback went into one of the state-rooms, while Bradford Carr was placed in irons and a guard placed over him, Rita Restel the while quietly seating herself at the table and picking up a book, as though wholly oblivious to the presence of the prisoner, who sat on a divan near a seaman standing by his side with drawn cutlass.

After a few moments a tall form glided out of the state-room which the hunchback had entered, and going on deck through the forward companionway, so as to avoid passing through the cabin, he revealed himself in the moonlight as Barton Keys, the fugitive.

"Leon, go on board yonder yacht and get her ready for sea, taking with you all that we wish to carry from the lugger."

"I will return soon, but if you hear my signal come to my aid promptly."

So ordered the fugitive murderer, and springing into the skiff alongside he rowed shoreward.

Walking rapidly across the lawn, unmindful that an eye was upon him that mistook his superb form and carriage for that of Bradford Carr, he sought the wing of the mansion where were the study and bed-chamber of the tutor.

The door opening upon the piazza was unlocked and boldly he entered, for he knew the spot well.

Once within he turned up the lamp dimly burning upon the center-table, and at once began a thorough search of the rooms.

Selecting articles here and there, he made a bundle of them and started upon his return to the shore.

Again the one at the window saw him, and wondered what all this meant.

But, with perfect trust in her lover Maud Brandt could not believe that any harm was meant by the lugger's strange visit, and still gazed in silence, wondering how it all would end.

Reaching the shore the man who had allied himself with pirates, rowed out to the Lady Maud.

He found her deck strewn with luggage brought from the lugger, and Leon met him at the gangway with the remark:

"All ready, senor, except to bring the Senorita Rita and the prisoner on board."

"Do that at once, Leon, while I have the men get the anchor up and set sail on this pretty craft, which we have exchanged the lugger for," was the answer.

Leon departed for the lugger, and by the time he had returned with Rita and the prisoner, the Lady Maud's anchor was up and sails set.

The prisoner was taken by his guard into the cabin, and it could be seen that he had been securely gagged, for Rita, ever cautious, had ordered this done, fearing that he might cry out and alarm the household of the manor.

Seizing the helm, as the yacht swung round and felt the pressure of the wind, Barton Keys

headed her out of the harbor, while to his ears came a long, piercing cry, that burst from the lips of Maud Brandt, as, from her window, she held the pretty craft flying out to sea and bearing with her the man she had so loved and trusted.

CHAPTER VII. FACE TO FACE.

THE Lady Maud had not gained a good offing, before all was ship-shape on board of her, for her well-trained crew, accustomed to storing away smuggled goods, soon found places for the luggage and traps brought from on board the lugger.

As she went bowling along before a fair breeze, Rita Restel came on deck and took her stand by the side of Barton Keys.

"Well, Rita, how is the prisoner?" he asked.

"Stern and silent, senor, for he bears his misfortune nobly."

"Ah, yes, he has nerve and pluck; but I will break both ere I have done with him."

"He is a superb specimen of manhood, Senor Barto, fully your equal I think."

"Thank you, sweet Rita, for the compliment, for Carr was always considered a kind of superior to all other men in everything."

"He is strangely handsome, and has an eye to read one's soul, it seems."

"Ah! Rita, don't fall in love with him, or I will fear to trust him with you."

"No! no! mine is a nature to love but once, Senor Barto," she said quickly, and, as though wishing to change the subject the man said:

"Well, Rita, thanks to your aid, we have been most successful."

"Yes, you have secured your prisoner, and exchanged the lugger for a very beautiful craft, but, fast as this yacht is, I doubt if she can run away from the Sea Owl."

"The lugger was fleet, I'll admit; but she had some bad wounds from shot and shell, and needed overhauling greatly, while this craft is worth three of her."

"Ah, yes, and father will be delighted at the exchange, I know; but will you see the prisoner to-night?"

"No, I will have him taken into a state-room, and to-morrow, when we are anchored in the lagoon, will be time enough."

"Here, Leon, take the helm, for I do not know how to pilot this craft into the Owl's Nest Lagoon."

"Yes, sir, but the old lugger knew the way there, I really believe; but this craft is a beauty, and will soon learn the smuggler tricks herself."

"Her name is the Lady Maud, senorita, but I suppose you will change it?" said Leon, as he took the helm.

"Yes, we will call her after the lugger, the Sea Owl, for it would not be right to force the Lady Maud to figure as a smuggler," answered the maiden.

"Then permit me to suggest a name," said Barton Keys.

"Certainly, senor," answered the maiden.

"Let her be known as the Lady Rita."

The moonlight showed plainly the smile of delight that crossed Rita's face, at the compliment Barton Keys sought to pay her, and she answered:

"If you so wish it, Senor Barto, I am willing."

"I do wish it, and say all success to the Lady Rita," and Barton Keys walked forward as though to glance over the stolen yacht, though, in the past, having been an honored guest on board on several pleasure cruises, he knew her well from keel to truck.

Along over the moonlit waters sped the yacht with her outlaw crew, and, throwing six knots an hour in her wake, it was just sunrise when she glided into the bayou that led to the basin, which the smugglers had named the "Owl's Nest."

Rita had sought her state-room, the one which had been Maud's, to rest, and Barton Keys, happy in his triumph, had retired to the one occupied by Colonel Brandt, the prisoner having been placed in another one forward.

Reaching the basin, by way of the bayous, through which she was towed by the boats, between the moss-hung trees, the newly-baptized Lady Rita was made fast to the buoy of the lugger, and the crew sought the rest they needed, with no fear of being disturbed in that dismal spot.

It was well on in the morning when Barton Keys arose, and found Rita awaiting breakfast for him, the table having been set beneath an awning upon the yacht's deck.

They both seemed proud of their capture, and after the meal was over Barton Keys sent Leon to bring the prisoner into the cabin and leave him there to await his coming.

Bradford Carr had not been thus far treated with greater severity than to be put in irons and confined in a state-room.

What might follow he could not tell; but he determined to take his misfortune coolly.

If not the smuggler known as Sea Owl, who then was the hunchback, he wondered.

He did not remember to have harmed him in any way.

He was distressed at the sorrow that must come to poor Maud when his absence was known, and he regretted that he had not told Colonel Brandt of the letter, and his intention to attempt the capture of the Sea Owl.

But it was too late for regrets, and he must bide the result.

What would follow he of course could not tell, and even to a man of his strong nerve the suspense was terrible; for he thought more of Maud's anxiety than of his own danger.

It was, therefore, a relief when Leon came to the little state-room and led him into the cabin.

There sat the hunchback seaman, grim and silent.

Leading the prisoner to a seat, at the command of the hunchback, Leon departed and Bradford Carr was alone with his captor.

"Well, senor, you have been entrapped," said the pretended hunchback, after a moment of silence.

"So it seems, by your treachery."

"I was faithful to myself, but treacherous to you whom I hate from my inmost heart."

"In what way have I ever harmed you, fellow?"

"In many ways."

"You say that you are not the Sea Owl?"

"No."

"Who, then, are you?"

"Barto, the Buccaneer."

"I never heard of such a pirate."

"You will ere long, for I hoist the black flag at an early day."

"Heaven protect the defenseless then, for your heart is as black as your flag, and your soul as deformed as your body," boldly said Bradford Carr.

At this the pretended hunchback laughed, and asked:

"Do you remember, senor, of ever meeting me before?"

"Never, before the day you brought me that threatening letter, though you do remind me of one whom I have met."

"Whom?"

"A villain, of course, when you remind me of him!"

"His name, please?"

"Barton Keys."

"Bradford Carr, you have devilish fine eyes—see!"

As the man spoke he threw off his wig and false beard, and then the pea-jacket he wore, and along with it the hideous bump that had been so skillfully attached to it.

"Great Heaven! this day, Barton Keys, you were to be hanged, and I find you here," and in spite of himself, Bradford Carr showed some emotion.

"Oh! yes, I was sentenced to die to day, but I escaped, as you doubtless heard, and am at present allied with smugglers, with the hope of being even more."

"Vile wretch, you confess yourself what you are?"

"Oh! yes, and why not?—for you will never appear against me."

"You mean then to kill me?" coolly asked Bradford Carr.

"Worse!"

And the words were fairly hissed from between the teeth of Barton Keys, as he turned his eyes full upon the face of the man he so hated.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT WAS WORSE THAN DEATH.

BRADFORD CARR did not flinch at the fearful threat of his enemy, that his fate would be worse than death.

He kept his eyes upon Keys's face and said, in his calm way:

"There are many fates that can be worse than death, for though I love life, the grave holds no terrors for me."

"I will visit upon you a fate that will make you long for death, Bradford Carr."

"What, for instance?" was the almost indifferent query.

"Oh, I know your nerve, and that if I struck you alone I could not bring a groan from your lips; but I shall hurt you through others."

"Villain! would you dare harm one who is as pure as an angel?" hissed Bradford Carr.

"You refer to Maud Brandt?"

"I refer to Miss Brandt."

"Well, I will tell you just what I have decided to do with you."

"Do what you please with me, but spare her."

"I shall do just as I please, sir. You are in my power, and she shall be whenever I see fit to make her my prisoner; but for the present, I shall let her suffer through you."

"Dastard!"

"Oh, I do not mind your calling me hard names, Carr, if it is any pleasure to you. You came here among us and won Maud Brandt's heart, and I swore she should never be yours. I had sworn to make her my wife, and I will keep my oath."

"Oh that I was free of these chains!" groaned poor Carr.

"But you are not, so will have to listen to

what I have to say; and can do me no harm, for, strong as I am, I know you are my master."

"To win the lovely Maud I took Ravelle's life, as you know, intending thereby to cancel a pecuniary debt I owed him, thus break the engagement between Maud and himself, and get you hanged as his murderer, and let the gallows remove in you the only rival I feared."

"My plot worked so well that I forced old Colonel Brandt, who was in my power through his gambling debts due me, to urge Maud to marry me; and to save her father she consented, you being then scouring the seas as the Pirate Priest."

"But you captured Chester Granger—curse him!—and he confessed all, so that I took the cell you occupied in jail, and was to die on the gallows built for you."

"But I escaped, like you, and like you cheated the gallows; and, unlike you, have turned to be a real pirate, and have you now in my power."

"My life was saved by that beautiful girl, who so cleverly captured you in the cabin, for the animal I was riding drowned under me in the lagoon, and she dragged me into her skiff and brought me on board her father's lugger."

"Her father is the old smuggler and half-pirate known as the Sea Owl, and he would have driven a knife into my heart but for the beautiful Rita."

"But he did not kill me, and, recognizing me as one who had done him a favor once in a gambling hell in New Orleans, was glad to have me as a guest; and has now gone off to purchase for me, with money I gave him, an armed schooner, in which I shall scour the seas as a pirate."

"In the mean time I have plotted to destroy you, and, with the aid of the fair Rita, have you in my power, and you need expect no mercy at my hands."

"I certainly would not expect mercy from a tiger, so why from a brute such as you?" was the response of Bradford Carr; and the face of his foe flushed with anger, while he half dropped his hand upon a knife in his belt.

"You cannot anger me, Carr, any more, for I hold so thoroughly the upper hand," he said, quietly.

But his prisoner made no reply, and the outlaw continued:

"Now let me tell you that my plan is not to kill you, but to treat you well."

"That is, you shall have a state-room below decks on my schooner, and there be chained, so that escape will be utterly impossible."

"As my neck is in a gallows' noose now, you may be certain that I shall protect myself with as fleet a vessel, strong an armament, and as good a crew as I can get, so that I can run if need be, and fight if I am in a tight place."

"You are to be my guest, and nominally the captain of my vessel."

"In the name of Heaven, what do you mean?"

"Just what I say; for the craft shall be called the Sea Ghoul, and I will be worthy of the name I give her, and her flag shall be one made up of a cross and cutlass."

"Good God!"

"Don't get excited, Carr, but bear me through."

"This flag, with myself dressed in the robe and hat of a Mexican padre, such as you wore, will cause me to be mistaken for you, for we are about the same size, and something alike, though I do not claim to be as handsome a man, and we have another difference in that you are honest and I am not; but these little differences will not be marked, you know, while I will get the credit of being Bradford Carr—or, in other words, you will be considered the Pirate Priest!"

Bradford Carr fairly shuddered under the words of his enemy, as they revealed the full enormity of his hatred toward him, and he said earnestly:

"Keys, I beg of you as man to man, as I stand in your way, to kill me, and so let it be known, rather than dishonor me as you threaten, for such indeed is worse than death."

"So I believed, to a high-minded man like you, and such is to be your fate."

"You see I will be a perfect fiend, once I hoist the cross and cutlass flag, and appear as yourself, and I will take your name, and lead the world to believe that you have turned pirate in earnest."

"I will write Colonel Brandt a letter, for I can forge your handwriting, and in it, tell him that you have taken up the cutlass with the cross as a sea-rover."

"It will crush the proud heart of Maud Brandt, to know that her lover has become a pirate, and after she has been humbled and suffered, I shall kidnap her and make her the bride of the Ghoul of the Sea, for such will be the name that I will win."

"Now, Bradford Carr, you know just what your fate is to be."

"Devil incarnate!" almost shrieked the tortured man, and, forgetting his manacles, he made a spring toward the inhuman wretch.

But his chains had been made fast to a ring-

bolt in the floor, and he fell heavily his full length upon the floor, while Barton Keys, with a light laugh at his anguish turned and left the cabin.

CHAPTER IX. THE SEA OWL.

SEVERAL days passed, after the scene in the yacht's cabin between Barton Keys and his victim, and one night a large, armed schooner was towed into the Sea Owl's Nest and dropped anchor not far from the Lady Rita and the lugger, that was the home of the smuggler captain, and receptacle for his smuggled booty.

It was the new vessel, bought by the old smuggler for Barton Keys, and that he had an eye for the beautiful, as far as a craft went, was very evident from his selection of the schooner, which was certainly a sea-rover that any man might be proud to command.

The strange craft was greeted with a cheer, by the men on the yacht and lugger, and then the smuggler captain went on board the Lady Rita, and met his pirate *protege*, who thanked him warmly for having secured for him so beautiful a vessel.

"She is all ready for sea, Captain Barto, and only needs your services as commander, and tomorrow you can go on board," said Captain Restel, who was a dark-faced, stern old sea-dog who looked more like the captain of a line-of-battle ship than a smuggler.

"Why not go on board at once, Captain Restel?" asked the impatient young man.

"Because we have to settle up some little affairs between us first, sir, which we will talk over in the morning.

"Now I will go on board of my Home Lugger to see my daughter, who I hope is well?"

"She is perfectly well, sir, and has done all in her power to keep me from dying with the blues, in this very dismal retreat of yours, Captain Restel."

"Yes, it is more of a paradise for alligators and owls than for human beings; but I observe that you have a very pretty craft here in place of my little lugger, the Sea Owl?" and the captain glanced about the cabin of the yacht.

"Yes, and I will tell you of her capture, Captain Restel."

"There is no need of that, my dear Captain Barto, for I already know all about it."

"In Satan's name how?"

"You know that I am no fool, and having been absent some little time, I did not dare run in until I knew there was no trap set for me, so I lay to, and sent Chincopin, my Indian spy, in his canoe to reconnoiter."

"He boarded the Home Lugger and heard all that had happened, and reporting to me, I came up."

"I congratulate you upon your success, Captain Barto, for this yacht is a beauty, and I predict for you a great success in your new calling of cutting throats and robbing."

"Thank you, Restel, I intend to be successful; but why can we not now arrange the business between us you speak of?"

"Because I wish to see my daughter, and prefer to settle it on the morrow," and bidding Barton Keys good-night, without asking him to accompany him on board the lugger where Rita dwelt, the smuggler chief went over the side into his boat.

In the basin Captain Restel always had his "Home Lugger," as he called the craft that never set sail from her anchorage, and then his cruising lugger, which had been left in exchange for the yacht.

There were several other small cruising craft belonging to the fleet, which he sent after smuggled goods, or kept as carriers of his ill-gotten gains to the nearest markets, where he could dispose of them to the best advantage.

With this little fleet he had won a name as the most daring smuggler of the Gulf shores, and his lawless acts being committed wholly under the cover of night, he had been called the Sea Owl.

What he had been in the past few knew, but it was said by those who professed to know, that he had once been a planter of wealth, but losing his riches he had taken to gambling, and forced to fly for some act of outlawry, he had taken his little daughter with him and turned smuggler.

That little daughter had grown up to womanhood upon the decks of her father's outlawed vessels, and he had taught her most carefully, and carried her with him, when in disguise he visited the ports of New Orleans, Mobile, Pensacola and Havana, until she had gained some knowledge of the world beyond the moss-hung walls of the Owl's Nest.

As he stepped on board the Home Lugger, Rita greeted her father most affectionately, and then an old negro and negress, dwellers on the craft, and slaves on the old plantation in his honest days, came forward and welcomed him with a freedom none of his seamen would have dared to show.

Descending into the cabin with his daughter, Captain Restel threw himself into a comfortable seat, and said:

"Well, it is pleasant to get home once more, and see your sweet face again, my child; but it

strikes me you are not looking as happy as usual."

"Father, I am not happy," and Rita burst into tears.

There was one virtue which Captain Restel possessed among all his faults, and that was love for his daughter.

He had seen, from her first meeting with Barton Keys, that her heart had gone forth to him with all the fervor of an idolatrous love, and he had determined that she should not love in vain, and had acted accordingly.

He knew all about the crime-stained young planter, and yet, a criminal himself, he had hoped that Rita would love an honest man; but if she loved otherwise, he would not thwart her.

So now he felt that he knew the cause of her unhappiness, and said in a kindly way:

"You need not be unhappy, Rita, my child, for all will come well."

"No, no, father, all will not come well, for I love one who does not love me in return."

"You mean Captain Barto?"

"Yes, father."

"But he will love you."

"No, for he loves that beautiful lady, Miss Brandt, and swears to force her into a marriage with him, though she does not love him."

"That he will not do, so be cheered, Rita, for Captain Barto will make you his bride."

"Oh, father!"

"I mean it, my child, you shall be the wife of the man you love," responded the smuggler captain, and the look on his face showed that he meant all that he said.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE MARRIAGE.

THE morning after the arrival of the schooner in the basin, Captain Restel called on board the yacht for Barton Keys and the two went to the new vessel together.

A cheer from the reckless crew greeted their new captain as he came on board, for they were pleased with his appearance; but, without giving him time to address a word to them, Captain Restel ushered Barton Keys into the cabin.

For an hour or more they remained there, and then Barton Keys came out alone and springing into a skiff alongside, rowed over to the lugger where Rita dwelt.

The maiden was pacing the deck and saw him coming, and hastily entered the cabin, where, upon boarding the lugger he followed her.

Rita turned both pale and red as he entered, and seemed unable to speak a word, as she held out her hand in greeting.

"Rita," said the man in a tone and manner that would have been frank, had it not been spoken with a certain indifference that amounted to almost rudeness:

"Rita, your father has just told me that you love me."

"He has told you the truth, senor," was the low response.

"You are aware of the crimes that I am guilty of, girl?"

"I am."

"And yet you love me?"

"Yet I love you."

"You are aware that I intend to hoist the black flag and become a sea rover?"

"I know all that, senor."

"And you can love a pirate?"

"I do love you."

"This is very strange, for I should appear to you as a very snake, Rita."

"And yet a snake has a mate to love it."

"You reason like a woman," he said almost petulantly.

"A woman reasons with her heart, senor, and therefore often goes wrong."

"Your father says that you wish to marry me?"

"I naturally wish to be bound to the one being I love in this world, besides my father, senor."

"And you will marry me?"

"Gladly, senor."

"To become a pirate's bride?"

"I am a pirate's daughter, senor."

"What if I do not love you?"

"I will teach you to love me, senor."

"I may be killed within the month?"

"It is certainly not worse to be a pirate's widow, than a pirate's wife, Senor Barto."

"You may see me die at the yard-arm, Rita?"

"Then I will live and avenge you," she said with a savage earnestness that amounted to vindictiveness.

"Hal! that is a good sentiment, and proves your love, Rita," he said quickly, as though more struck with her desire for revenge than her love.

"I hope I will not have to prove my affection by avenging you, Barton Keys; but the one who slays you, if I live, I will hunt to death in its worst form."

She looked grandly beautiful as she spoke, and he answered:

"Well, Rita, I promised your father that I would make you my wife."

"And you do so merely because he asks it?"

"No, for I admire you greatly; but there is

one other I sought to make my wife, and now cannot."

"You refer to Miss Brandt?"

"Yes."

"You have a revengeful feeling in wishing to marry her?"

"I think so, more than love it is revenge."

"Then you will have to get your revenge upon her by destroying her happiness, as you have, in making Mr. Carr your prisoner."

"Yes, I will have to be content with that; but now let us signal for your father and the priest to come on board."

"The priest!"

"Yes, for your father landed on the coast and kidnapped a padre for this very ceremony, as he knew that you loved me, and was determined that I should never have my vessel until you were my wife."

"Ah! I see that you bought me."

"It amounts to about that."

She looked deeply pained for an instant, and then said earnestly:

"It shall not amount to a trade long, for Barton Keys, I will make you love me."

He smiled, but made no reply and going on deck signaled the schooner.

In response a boat soon after put off, containing two oarsmen, Captain Restel and a man in priestly garb, the latter wearing a bandage over his eyes to blindfold him.

Reaching the lugger the captain led the priest into the cabin, where Barton Keys and Rita awaited them, the former having assumed a disguise, for he was well known to the holy father whose parish was not very far from the Blue Anchor Inn.

"Padre, there are two here to be married, and it is for this purpose I have brought you to unite them."

"Please perform the ceremony as quickly as possible and accept this as a token for your church, for though it was dishonorably gained it will be spent in an honest cause," and the Sea Owl thrust into the hands of the padre a bag of gold, a very considerable amount, while at the same time he took the blindfold from his eyes.

The padre glanced around him with some considerable curiosity at first.

He had been inveigled from his home by the smuggler, and carried on board the schooner; but Father Homer was a brave man, and whatever his part he meant to face it fearlessly.

He was treated well on board the schooner, but kept confined to his state-room.

Now he found himself on board a smaller craft, in the presence of three persons two of whom he was to bind together in the bonds of wedlock, and his reward, a rich one, had already been given him.

That they were outlaws he knew, and there his knowledge ended.

Making the best of the situation he said:

"I thank you, my son, and the poor among my people shall share your bounty, for won by outlawry, it should do some good."

"Your names, please, my children?"

"Barto the Buccaneer," said Barton Keys in a firm voice, while the maiden answered simply:

"Rita."

After asking a few questions of each, the priest united the two, the man stern and calm, the girl flushed and trembling.

"Accept this, padre, as my offering for your church," said Barton Keys, thrusting into his hands a roll of bank notes.

"And this as a souvenir of me, holy father," added Rita, unclasping a chain about her neck and giving to the priest a crucifix of solid gold, studded with precious stones.

"Oh, my son, and you my daughter you overwhelm me with your charity, and may the good Mother guide you aright will be my prayer, and lead you out of the sinful paths I cannot but know you tread," said the padre earnestly.

"I am ready, Senor Padre, to return with you on board the vessel, and before many hours you shall be safely landed upon the coast near your home," said Captain Restel, and once more blindfolding the priest, they returned on board the schooner, accompanied by Barton Keys and his wife.

Then, with the first shadows of nightfall, Rita bade her father a tearful farewell, and the Ghoul of the Sea glided out of the lagoon and rode the waters of the Gulf, the cross and cutlass flag, embroidered by the fair fingers of the smuggler's daughter and pirate's bride, floating at her peak, and commanded by the man whose own acts had branded him with infamy.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PADRE'S STORY.

SOME time has passed away since the cutting out of the yacht Lady Maud from her anchorage, and the leaving of the trim, but weather-worn lugger Sea Owl in her stead.

The disappearance of Bradford Carr cast a deep shadow upon the hearts of those in Brandt Manor; but, although Maud had seen him depart, and, as she believed, return to his room for his luggage, she, with her noble young brother Irving, still held her trust in him, and

could not believe against all seeming proof, that he had become a pirate.

One proof was a letter received by Colonel Brandt which was as follows:

"AT SEA, OFF BALIZE.

"COLONEL RUPERT BRANDT:—

"SIR:—These, the last lines that you will receive from me, will doubtless surprise you greatly and give you pain, for it is hard to feel that one whom you have cherished and aided has been unworthy of your regard.

"I write you from on board my vessel, a schooner I now command in a career which I well know is an unholy one, yet which I am compelled to assume charge of, as I am held by bonds which I cannot break to those who have served me well in the past.

"I had hoped, when I gave up my title of Pirate Padre, won upon the high seas, it would be to lay it down forever; but I am forced now, from circumstances which I cannot explain, to resume the cutlass, and with it I shall take up the robes of the cross, and become a free rover in reality this time, where I was one only in name before.

"Bitterly do I regret this step; but, a mere creature of circumstances, I must drift with the tide, bear me where it will, and to whatsoever end it may.

"In my heart I feel for the one who has trusted me with her love.

"I refer to your beautiful, noble daughter, and I beg that she may forget me, and that my generous-hearted pupil, Irving, will cast from his bosom the regard he felt for one who was unworthy.

"More I cannot say, nor do I care to, for my heart is too full, my brain on fire in writing this farewell to them I have so dearly loved, and shall ever love, but who must now cast off forever one who gives up honor, hope and all to become known no longer as Bradford Carr, but to sink himself forever in

"THE PIRATE PRIEST."

Another proof, as the colonel believed, was that a man answering the description of Bradford Carr was certainly the commander of the schooner Ghoul of the Sea, which was winning such a reputation upon the waters of the Gulf.

The captain of this outlaw craft was tall, dressed as a padre, had a smooth face, and carried a flag of a cutlass and cross, such as the absent tutor had done when he was known as the Pirate Priest, only the skull, crossbones and an anchor were also embroidered upon the black field.

The lugger left by the smugglers, Irving Brandt had run up to Mobile, and had wholly refitted, and with increased sail put on her, had turned her into a yacht, giving her the name of Lady Maud.

The yacht Lady Maud, changed into the Lady Rita, had been seen several times by night, and it was evident that she was no longer an honest craft.

One day Colonel Brandt returned from the village, some leagues from the Plantation, and brought with him Father Homer, a priest who had as a charge several small chapels along the coast.

The worthy priest had before visited at Brandt Manor, and was warmly welcomed by both Maud and Irving.

After dinner was over, Colonel Brandt said:

"Maud, as you and Irving have seemed so blind in your trust of Bradford Carr, I wish Father Homer to make known to you an adventure that occurred to him some time since, and which may cause you to see that the man you defend is guilty."

"I have great confidence in Father Homer, father, as you know, but I will have to see with my own eyes Bradford Carr as the Pirate Priest, before I believe him to be guilty," quietly answered Maud, while Irving broke out with:

"Those are my sentiments, sis."

"Well, my children, I will, as your father requests it, tell you the circumstance to which he alludes, and you can judge for yourselves.

"I was sent for one night, to visit a man on a coasting craft, who was said to be dying.

"Of course I went, and I was entrapped on board a large armed schooner, and confined to my cabin as a prisoner.

"There I remained until the craft dropped anchor, and then one morning was blindfolded, and carried on board another craft, the cabin of which was as comfortable as a lady's chamber.

"Then I was allowed to see, and I beheld three persons present, one a short man, with a stern, sailor-like look and a great deal of dignity of manner; another, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, whose face and head were shielded under a wig and false beard, while he was dressed in the costume of an ordinary seaman.

"The third person I gazed upon was a brilliantly beautiful young woman, with eyes that seemed to fascinate you.

"She was exquisitely attired, wore numerous jewels, and this crucifix about her neck, suspended by the massive gold chain as you see it," and the priest banded to Maud the crucifix which Rita had given him.

Then he continued:

"I saw that the man was disguised, but could not pierce it, though his eyes and voice were familiar, and afterward I recalled to mind Mr. Carr, whom I had several times met, as the one he reminded me of.

"Then I discovered why I had been so cleverly kidnapped, for I was commanded to marry the man to the maiden."

"Which man?" asked Maud, and her voice quivered.

"The one in disguise."

"What name did he give, Father Homer?"

"My daughter, he gave the name of Barto the Buccaneer."

"That is not Bradford Carr."

"No, Maud, but mark that the name Barto seems a blending of the two names, Bradford Carr," said the colonel.

"I do not observe it, father; but what then occurred, Father Homer?"

"I was liberally rewarded for my services, with donations for my church, and this crucifix was given me by the maiden, after which I was again blindfolded and carried back to my state-room upon the other vessel.

"That night the craft set sail, the man whom I had married to the maiden taking command of her for the first time, as I learned from several things I overheard, and his wife accompanying him.

"I was landed at a point on the coast and allowed to go my way, and as the schooner set sail I saw on her decks the same tall form, but now in priestly garb, and it was Bradford Carr."

"You are sure of this, Father?" cried Maud, her face very pale.

"I am certain that it was Bradford Carr, my daughter, for he smiled and waved his hand to me."

"Another man might have done the same," muttered Irving, and then he added:

"Still I believe that Mr. Carr is not that Ghoul of the Sea now figuring as the Pirate Priest."

"Brother, bless you for your faith, for it strengthens mine," earnestly said Maud, and she arose and left the room, followed by Irving, leaving the colonel to entertain the worthy priest, who had added still stronger proof to the guilt of Bradford Carr.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DRIFTING BOAT.

THE better to acquaint my readers with the characters of my story, as they make their entrances and exits before them, I must go back to one night of storm on the Gulf coast, some time previous to the scenes related in the foregoing pages.

A small sail-boat had ventured out rather far from land in the afternoon, considering the unsettled state of the weather, and in it was a single human being, a handsome, fearless-faced boy, dressed in sailor attire.

But few though his years had been, he was every inch the sailor, and seemed to have perfect confidence in his sail-boat which was certainly a staunch and sea-worthy craft.

He had been up to the town and was upon his return when the storm overtook him, and darkness came on rapidly in its wake.

Luffing up, he had close-reefed his mainsail and jib, and stood at his helm with the air of one conscious of his power to ride safely through the dangers before him.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon a dark object ahead upon the waters, and at the same time he heard a hail in a voice that certainly did not belong to any hardy mariner of the deep.

"Ho, the sloop! the sloop, ahoy!" came the hail, in a musical, ringing, girlish voice.

"Ay, ay, I am coming," shouted the youth, and running past the boat, he luffed up and threw a line.

It fell short, and the drifting boat passed on. Again he got under way, and once more passing the boat, he threw a line.

This time it was caught and made fast, and the boat was drawn alongside and two persons were dragged on board the little craft.

"You have saved our lives, sir, for our boat would not have held up much longer— What! a boy alone in a boat, and on such a night," said the man who crouched in the cockpit, as a flash of lightning revealed to him who had been his preserver.

"Yes, I'm only a boy, sir, but I have been out in as bad storms in this very little craft, and we can ride it through all right, so don't you be alarmed," and he addressed his last remark to the one who had first hailed him, and who was a young girl of fourteen, beautiful in spite of her paleness and the masses of wet hair that hung about her, half-hiding her face.

"I am not afraid for myself, sir, but for my father," she said, softly.

"Yes, and I can lend you no aid, young sir, as you see that I am ironed hand and foot."

As he spoke he held up his hands to view, and the boy for the first time saw that he wore manacles, for when aiding him into the boat he had believed him to be suffering from some injury.

At this discovery the youth fairly started, but said, kindly:

"You have been unfortunate, sir."

"I have brought my misfortunes upon myself, young sir, so that I have no one else to blame.

"But do you dwell upon this coast?"

"Yes, sir, my home is Brandt Plantation, and my name is Irving Brandt."

"Indeed! I have heard of your father as a

gallant soldier, and have seen you in your little sail-boat often before."

"Have seen me, sir?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Oh, cruising around, and in the inland waters; but have you any idea that you have made a great capture to-night?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know that you have captured a man with a large price upon his head?"

"I do not, sir."

"Well, it is so, for my little daughter Myrtle here, and myself were captured, and I managed to make my escape, as I am, preferring death by drowning, rather than at the yard-arm."

"Are you so guilty as to deserve such a death, sir?"

"You can be the judge, when you know who I am; but, be I what I am, you have saved our lives even though you afterward lead me to the gallows."

"That I will not do, sir, for I did not capture you, whoever you are, by any act of courage upon my part, but picked you up in distress, in a drifting, sinking boat, and I will land you where you wish, if in my power."

"By Heaven, boy! but you have the true ring of manhood about you, that is certain; but let me tell you, Master Brandt, that I am Palafox the Pirate, and my haunt is upon this coast, not many leagues from where we now are."

"I have often heard of you, Captain Palafox, and men say that you are too good for a pirate, and I know of many good deeds you have done to offset your evil ones.

"But you are no prisoner of mine, and I will run you to your rendezvous, if you will pilot me there."

"And you will pilot back an armed craft upon me, eh?"

"Oh, no, what confidence I am intrusted with through your misfortune, I will hold sacred."

"Well said, sir, and from this night count Palafox the Pirate your friend to command."

"And Myrtle too," softly said the girl, and she held forth her hand, which Irving Brandt warmly grasped.

"Now, my young captain, my rendezvous lies about due north, and when you get close inshore Myrtle will be your pilot, for she can run a craft in as well as I can."

Irving at once ran the little craft for the shore, and Myrtle piloted it into the lagoon and up to the retreat of the Sea Fox, as the pirate was also called, and from that night the youth possessed a secret that nothing could have forced him to betray, discovering it as he did through the misfortune of those he so well had served.

CHAPTER XIII.

"A WHEEL WITHIN A WHEEL."

HAD it not been for the rescue of Palafox the Pirate, by Irving Brandt, Bradford Carr would have died on the gallows as the murderer of Soule Ravelle, when Barton Keys was the guilty one, for, when all the efforts of the youth and his sister failed to save the tutor, the pledge of the outlaw to his boy rescuer was remembered, and the result was that a solitary pilgrimage was made to the buccaneer rendezvous.

Glad to return the favor done him, Palafox had gone to the jail and rescued Bradford Carr, and more, taking a greater interest in Irving and those he loved, he had determined to watch the Brandt Manor that no harm should befall it from other sea rovers.

When the Ghoul of the Sea commenced her depredations along the coast and out in the Gulf, Captain Palafox had it in his power to warn Maud of an intended raid upon the plantation, and not only that but to be on hand with his crew and beat back the pretended Pirate Priest.

Realizing the danger of their dwelling upon the coast unprotected, Colonel Brandt removed his family to New Orleans in Irving's lugger yacht, the Lady Maud, and on the run over the fleet craft had sighted, and after a brisk chase, had captured the Lady Rita, as it will be remembered the pretty sloop had been rechristened.

On the yacht had been found a crew of smugglers, a costly freight, and one passenger in the person of Rita the Sea Ghoul's bride.

She had professed to be a dweller upon the coast, who had taken passage on the yacht, believing it to be a packet coaster; but one of the crew turning traitor had told Irving and the colonel just who she was, and that her pretended baggage was in reality smuggled booty.

The woman was set free upon the arrival of the two vessels in port, but her booty was held, as was also the yacht, while the crew, excepting the traitor, who had bought his liberty by his confession, were sent on board a man-of-war as prisoners.

Securing a pleasant home in New Orleans, Colonel Brandt and Maud settled down to a quiet life, for with her heart aching at the cloud hanging over her lover, the maiden felt little

desire to go into society, though well she knew that she could reign as queen.

As for Irving he remained on board his yacht, which with its negro crew was anchored out at the lake, which is only a few miles from New Orleans, and having laid certain plans to discover if the Pirate Priest was indeed his loved tutor, he held himself in readiness to carry out those plans.

In this endeavor he had as an ally the traitor smuggler, whom he had set free and retained in his employ, and who had pledged himself to certain work for the youth.

There certainly had been two more cases of seemingly strong proof brought before Irving and Maud, that Bradford Carr could be none other than the Pirate Priest, for the the smuggler had said that such was the name that the padre bore, and more, when he made known that Rita was the bride of the Ocean Ghoul, the two, when confronted by Colonel Brandt his son had distinctly said that the name of her husband was Bradford Carr.

Another proof still seemed to be in that the Pirate Priest wore on his little finger a blood-red stone in which was set a diamond, and just such a ring had Maud presented to the tutor.

Yet, with all this staring them in the face both Maud and Irving remained firm in their belief that Bradford Carr had not turned pirate, though they could not solve the mystery of these seeming proofs that he was.

Another ally of the youth and maiden in endeavoring to solve the secret, was Palafox the Pirate.

He had of late secretly and so well served both the brother and sister, that Irving, deeply interested in the beautiful little daughter of the outlaw, had urged that she be sent away from that lonely haunt on the coast, and be allowed to attend school in New Orleans.

Gladly had the Sea Fox granted this, and Myrtle, the pirate's daughter, had been entered as a pupil at Madam Chotard's fashionable boarding-school for young ladies, and under the patronage of Maud Brandt, though only the four interested suspected the secret.

But Maud had become deeply interested in the young girl, and felt it her duty, if in her power to "snatch a brand from the burning," and save Myrtle from the fate that threatened her.

Having turned to piracy from a force of circumstances, rather than from the commission of crime, Captain Palafox had never been a cruel monster like other sea-rovers, nor had he warred against American vessels, while he had protected the dwellings along the coast between New Orleans and Mobile from other rovers.

With hope that his loved child would not be forced to grow up in a pirate haunt, he had determined to cast off the shackles that bound him to outlawry, and gain a pardon for the past for himself and crew by turning buccaneer-hunter for the Government.

Thus matters stood some months after Colonel Brandt and his family removed from their plantation home to New Orleans, and both the Sea Fox and Irving Brandt were devoting all their energies to discover the true identity of the Pirate Priest.

CHAPTER XIV. THE PIRATE'S WIFE.

THAT Rita was in a fair way to keep her word and make Barton Keys love her, even against his will, seemed certain, ere the schooner had been a month at sea under her new commander, for the pirate found his every wish anticipated, his wild, reckless life made comfortable, and it was not very long before he found himself turning to the sharer of his dangers for advice.

Having been almost reared on the deck of a vessel, when cruising with her father and in following him in his lawless career, inured to perils that tried the stoutest hearts, Rita had come to possess perfect control over herself; and her nerve was wont to win the admiration of the crew on many a fearful night of storm and trying occasion, when capture seemed imminent.

Thus it was that she had become a good sailor, and she amazed her husband one day, when he gave her permission to take command, by sending forth her ringing orders and setting sail on the schooner, in a manner that showed a perfect knowledge of a craft from keel to topmast.

"I am afraid I am going to love you in spite of myself, Rita," he had said to her one day, and the words gave her more than joy.

Thus the days passed into weeks, and months were formed—months that made the schooner of the pretended Pirate Priest known in the Gulf of Mexico as a craft that defied capture, and her captain as a merciless wretch who deserved death a hundred-fold, if such were possible to inflict upon him.

Often had Barton Keys determined to run into the Brandt Manor harbor, devastate the home and carry off Maud; but he was persuaded by Rita not to do so, and in the persuasion there was something so closely allied to a threat, if he

did so, that he kept clear of that part of the coast.

Twice he had come upon the lugger-yacht, with Irving Brandt on board, once to give her chase, and have her outsail him, and again to catch her among the Chandeleur Islands, and after bringing her to with a damaging broadside, to instantly carry out his character of Bradford Carr by sending an officer and men on board to repair damages, and with the apology that had he known that it was his old pupil he would not have fired upon him, and telling him to go on his way unmolested.

One day the schooner sighted a small craft which Rita pronounced to be one of her father's smuggling fleet, and she was instantly signaled.

The old smuggler captain was not on board, but as she was bound to New Orleans to dispose of her booty, Barton Keys determined to take advantage of her going there to send the costly treasure which he had on board and dispose of it, and he said:

"Now, Rita, I am afraid to trust all this treasure to any man, and especially the money which will be paid for it, and I beg that you will go in the little craft to New Orleans, dispose of the booty, and return to the basin and remain with your father until I run in for you."

Rita suspected nothing, and so took passage on the little vessel for the city, and, as the reader already knows, was captured by Irving Brandt in the Lady Maud, while Barton Keys, thus freed of his wife's presence sailed for Brandt Plantation determined to carry off Maud, but was thwarted in his evil design by Palafox the Pirate, who beat him back to his vessel from the very lawn in front of the mansion.

Having explained how it was that Rita came to be captured on the smuggler craft, I will proceed with what followed, after her release by Irving Brandt.

Many a woman, thus thrown alone upon her own resources, would have been utterly wretched; but not so with the Sea Owl's daughter, for, hardly had she gained her pardon, when she coolly took from about her person various little packages of jewels which she had concealed there, while she said grimly:

"They robbed us of our booty, but here is more in value than all it would have brought in gold."

After selecting some of the more costly of the jewels, she replaced the others, and left the hotel.

Having been in the city before with her father, Rita found her way without inquiring to a street in a far from fashionable quarter of the town.

Turning down it she walked on her way slowly, reading the signs as she went along, as though watching for some name.

At length she paused before a sign on which she read:

"RUDOLPHO,

"Dealer in Gold, Silver, Jewels, and General Merchandise.

"MONEY LOANED, AND ODDS AND ENDS PURCHASED."

"This is the place," she said, and she at once entered.

A man with a dark, sinister face saw her as she came in, and struck with her elegant appearance came forward and asked:

"How can I serve you, lady?"

"You purchase jewels, do you not?"

"Yes, lady."

"Are you the Senor Rudolpho?"

"I am, lady."

"What are these worth?" and she placed a score of sparkling gems before his eyes.

He fairly started at the sight, and said:

"They are all handsome jewels, lady, and their value is considerable."

"What are they worth to you?"

"All, or in part, lady?"

"All."

"There are just twenty of them, lady, and they are worth seven thousand dollars."

"Which means that you will give twelve thousand for them if you have to."

He saw that she knew their value, so said:

"We try to get goods at a value to make a good profit on, lady; but I will give you ten thousand for them."

"I will take just twelve thousand."

"I cannot give that sum, lady."

"Then I will seek one who can elsewhere," and she turned to depart, when he cried:

"Stay, lady! the jewels are really so very fine that I will risk that sum on them."

"There is no risk, senor, as you know; but give me the money."

He counted it out to her, and said:

"Pardon me, lady, but I hope that these jewels came rightly into your hands."

She did not flinch, as she replied:

"As honestly as the smuggled and pirated goods with which your shop is stored came into your possession."

It was his time to start now, and he turned pale, but said:

"Dear lady, do you think that I would keep smuggled goods?"

"I know it, Senor Rudolpho, and as you have a big bargain in the jewels I have just sold you, I wish you to do me a favor."

"You have but to name it, lady."

"Where can I purchase a fast sailing craft of from thirty to forty tons burden?"

"You, lady?" he asked with surprise.

"So I said, senor."

"A swift-sailing craft?"

"Yes."

"There is not one for sale here now, lady, but just such a one sailed yesterday for Pensacola, and—"

"Is she very fast?"

"Wonderfully so, lady, and a beauty, for she was built for a Gulf cruiser, but being too small a Spanish Don at Pensacola purchased her and sailed for home in her only yesterday."

"And she can be found there now?"

"Yes, anchored off the don's villa."

For a few moments Rita was silent, and then she said abruptly:

"Senor Rudolpho, I must have a crew of fifteen good men."

"A crew, lady?"

"Yes."

"Without a vessel?"

"I will find a vessel—but no, I wish you to purchase me a small and fast-sailing lugger, and throw on board of her a cargo of some kind."

"Then get the crew on board I need, and one of them must be a man fit to be an officer, and all of them men who are willing to take their lives in one hand for a good sum of gold in the other."

"You surprise me, lady."

"See here, Senor Rudolpho, I know you as the receiver and seller of smuggled and piratical goods, and that is why I sought you."

"I know that you can secure for me a lawless set of men, just what I need for a crew, and I will pay them liberally for the work in hand."

"Now, there are two thousand dollars with which to purchase for me a lugger and store it with thirty days' provisions, and what is over keep for your services."

"I wish to sail to-morrow night, and at dark I will call here and expect you to take me on board of my vessel, so do not disappoint me, senor, for who knows but that you may make a fortune out of me yet?"

"Good-day, Senor Rudolpho, and remember at dark to-morrow, I will be here," and with this Rita swept out of the shop, leaving the man utterly amazed at the strange command that he had just received from a beautiful woman whom he had believed at first the petted darling of some family of wealth, who had come in to dispose of her jewels to help some erring brother or lover out of a gambling scrape.

CHAPTER XV.

A WOMAN AT THE HELM.

TRUE to her word, Rita put in an appearance at the shop of the Senor Rudolpho at the appointed time.

The shopman met her at the door, evidently having been on the watch for her, and greeted her with a polite bow and an invitation to enter what he was pleased to call his "sanctum," but about which there was no appearance of sacredness other than a rare painting of the Last Supper, which some poor unfortunate had had to sell for bread, or which had been stolen.

Rich India shawls, elegant paintings, massive silver service, *bijouterie* of all descriptions of more or less value, and weapons of a dozen different nations were visible upon all sides, proving that the Senor Rudolpho was driving a very unique and profitable business.

"Be seated, lady," he said politely.

"Is there any delay, senor, that I should tarry here?" asked Rita coldly.

"No, lady, I have secured you a thirty-ton lugger that sails well, and fifteen men, one of whom is an intelligent young man, a perfect sailor, so that you need feel no dread of intrusting him as captain."

"I shall be captain of my own vessel, Senor Rudolpho, but I need a man who can be relied on to aid me."

The senor was amazed, for he had discovered that the lady meant to be her own mistress.

"As you please, lady, I did not know that you understood the management of a vessel."

"I do, perfectly, was the quiet reply."

Senor Rudolpho was soon interested in this strange and beautiful creature.

"Who can she be?" he wonderingly asked himself.

But he was unable to answer the query, so said:

"May I ask the service you wish the crew for, lady, so that there can be no mistake about them?"

"I told you, yesterday, that I wished them men who were willing to carry their lives in their hands for generous pay."

"They will do it, lady."

"Then that is all sufficient, so kindly escort me to the vessel, senor, for I see that my carriage has arrived with my baggage."

"With pleasure, lady."

The vehicle had halted at the door and Senor

Rudolpho and Rita entered, after the former had told the driver where to put them down.

They landed at a point on the levee, a trifle above the city, and opposite which a small lugger lay at anchor.

Bidding the driver await his coming the senior hailed, and a boat came ashore.

The luggage belonging to Rita was then put in the boat by the two men who came ashore, and a minute after the woman stood upon the deck of her purchase.

"This is your Lady Captain, Senior Argyle."

Rita bent her haughty head in acknowledgment, and answered:

"Please come with me into the cabin, Senior Argyle."

The two men followed her into the cabin, and Rita glanced around her with an air of agreeable surprise, as she saw that even in the short time that he had had, the Senior Rudolpho had done all he could for her comfort.

"You are very kind, senior, to fit the cabin up so nicely for me, and I thank you," she said in her sweet way that was natural to her when she unbent from her hauteur.

The senior was delighted and made some complimentary remark in return.

But, unheeding this, Rita turned to the young sailor and addressed him.

He was a man of twenty-five, perhaps, with a clean cut beardless face, stamped with refinement, yet reckless in the extreme.

That he had been reared the gentleman was evident, and it seemed sad to think that he had descended to the reckless adventurer.

He was dressed in sailor attire and looked very handsome, with his golden curly hair and blue eyes, as he stood before Rita, his tarpaulin in his hand.

"Senior Argyle, are you afraid to die?" came the first question from Rita.

"No, seniorita, I am not if need be for the sacrifice," was the frank rejoinder.

"You will suit me, senior, and I wish to make you my first officer, for I will command the lugger; but are you particular as regards the service you enter upon?"

"No, lady, for though I would prefer a life of honor, if in my power to grasp it, misfortune has dragged me down and I must needs accept a living from the world, come as it may."

"Very well, Senior Argyle, I feel that we will get along well together; but now about the men?"

"The crew will follow my lead, lady, wherever it be, for they have served with me before."

"Then no more need be said: now, Senior Rudolpho, are you sufficiently paid for your services?"

"More than paid, lady—but I really have not the honor of knowing your name?"

"Nor is it necessary that you should, senior; but I thank you for your kindness, and we will doubtless meet again."

"Adios, senior."

The Senior Rudolpho knew that this meant a dismissal, and he said:

"Farewell, lady, and success and happiness to you."

"Now, Argyle, if you will set me ashore I will feel obliged."

"And I will put on a more suitable attire for the sea and soon join you, Senior Argyle, so that you may get the lugger under way," called out Rita as the two men left the cabin.

"Now, Argyle, you know my instructions, to find out all about this mysterious and beautiful woman, and report to me, for I am determined that she shall not slip through my hands," said Rudolpho.

"I understand, senior, the terms you engaged me on," was the somewhat significant response.

"Now don't fall in love with her, make a fool of yourself, and give me the slip."

"I do not desert my trusts, Senior Rudolpho."

"I know that, and therefore trust you."

"Good-by and *bon voyage*."

The two grasped hands, and the Senior Rudolpho was rowed ashore; while Argyle got the anchor up and sail set, just as Rita came on deck and took the tiller, saying quietly:

"I take the helm of this craft, Senior Argyle, to guide its destinies where I will."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PILOT.

WHATEVER doubt the young mate, and the crew of the lugger, might have had of the seamanship of Rita, it was quickly dispelled, when the craft was skillfully guided through the various vessels at anchor and with a fresh and free wind, went bowling down the river at a speed that left eight knots in her wake to the hour.

"She is a good sailer, but carries a lee helm that makes her steer hard," said Rita, in a way that showed she knew what she was about.

"Permit me to lend you my aid, seniorita," and Argyle stepped forward.

"You may take the helm, sir, and I will walk forward and have a look over the craft, which I must admit I am pleased with; but did the Senior Rudolpho speak with you of a pleasure lugger belonging to a Spanish Don at Pensacola?"

"Yes, seniorita—"

"Pardon me, but call me Lady Rita, please," interrupted Rita, giving the name by which she had been known upon her pirate husband's vessel.

"Certainly, Lady Rita; but you asked me if the Senior Rudolpho spoke to me about the Spanish Don's yacht?"

"Yes."

"He said that you were anxious to purchase the craft if you could."

"I am, and, if I cannot purchase her, I intend to have her," was the calm response.

"It would be better to cut her out and thus save the purchase money," suggested Argyle.

"Perhaps it would," said Rita, thoughtfully, and then she added:

"We will see when we get there what is best, and do it."

Whatever Argyle might have thought, from Senior Rudolpho's description of Rita, he now discovered that he had one to deal with that he was forced to respect, and must obey as though she were a man, and his advice to the crew was from that stand-point, for some of them were inclined at first to murmur against a lady captain.

By dawn the lugger had passed the Balize and was on the waters of the Gulf; driving swiftly along under plenty of canvas.

In due time she ran into Pensacola and dropped anchor in a convenient position for flight, should it be necessary.

It was night when the lugger arrived, but early in the evening, so that the tap-rooms and inns were still open, and Argyle at once went on shore to see what discoveries he could make regarding the pleasure craft that had caused Rita to visit the port.

About midnight he returned, and found the Lady Captain awaiting him in the cabin.

"Well, Argyle, your face shows that you have made some discovery," she said.

"Yes, Lady Captain, I met in a tap-room a sailor from on board the very craft, and one whom I have met before, and he was not only glad to see me, but wished me to join him in a plan for the cutting out of the very lugger."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Lady Rita, I got the story from him, as we once served together on a craft that did not fly an honest flag, and it seems he belongs to one of St. Augustine's band of smugglers, and they want the craft for themselves."

"I know who they are, and have no love for them; but what said this shipmate of yours?"

"He said that he had been sent over to New Orleans by his captain to look up a vessel for the crew, as theirs was getting old, and he had hit upon the lugger, and learning that she was to sail for Pensacola, he had shipped in her and been appointed second mate."

"Arriving here in port he had sent a runner at once to his captain with the news, and received an answer that afternoon that he would come up with his crew and cut the lugger out."

"Of course I promised to join him, and, as he could not leave the lugger, he asked me to await the arrival of his captain at the inn, telling me how to recognize him, and agreeing with me upon signals when we approached the vessel in our boats, or as the chief deemed best."

"He did not think the crew would arrive until to-morrow night, and I promised to remain at the inn, but as soon as he departed, I hastened back to tell you all."

"You have done well, Senior Argyle; but what force is there on the lugger?"

"Nine men, with my comrade, Lady Rita."

"And we are sixteen, so we will at once act."

"And attack in the lugger?"

"Yes, for the vessel we seek is anchored above, and we have not been seen to anchor here, so can run on to the upper anchorage; but, instead of dropping the iron, we can lay alongside of her, seize her, and be on our way out to sea in ten minutes."

"It is a bold and good plan, Lady Rita; but I wish we had more time."

"We must not delay, or the St. Augustines may run in and cut out the craft before our very eyes."

"True, Lady Rita, so I will at once get the men up and ready for the work," and a quarter of an hour after the lugger had left her anchorage and was gliding up the harbor in the direction where lay the prize the Lady Captain was determined to possess.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ATTACK ON THE PRIZE.

THE craft that Rudolpho had recommended was a lugger, as trimly built as a yacht, and in fact a good deal on the model of the *goletas* used as pleasure vessels by the wealthy Cubans, and as a means of conveyance to and from their plantations.

She was armed with two broadside brass guns and a twelve-pound pivot, carried a great spread of sail, and was as sharp as a razor and deeper than vessels generally of her tonnage.

The Don had fitted her out in fine style for a cruise to Havana before leaving New Orleans in her, and expected to set sail within a few days with his family.

The pretty craft was anchored just off the

Don's home, and there were other vessels not far away from her.

Winding her way among these came the lugger of the Lady Captain, and Argyle's keen eyes soon picked out the prize.

"There she is, Lady Rita."

"Yes, it can be no other, so I'll run close by her, and as the wind is favorable, lay this craft alongside, while you spring on board with ten of the men," and Rita gave her orders in a tone that was perfectly calm.

After a few minutes Argyle returned and said:

"We are all ready, Lady Captain."

"Do not shed blood, remember, unless compelled to do so, but go prepared to kill if need be," sternly said the woman, and then she devoted her whole attention to the work before her.

The men who were not to board with the young officer, stood ready at the balyards, awaiting the command from their Lady Captain to act, while Argyle and his boarders crouched down under the bulwarks ready for the spring at the proper moment.

The anchored lugger was now not more than a cable's length away, and, under a five knot breeze the hostile craft was rushing toward her.

"Ho, that lugger! don't scrape our paint off," hailed a husky voice from on board the anchored vessel, as the course of the coming vessel showed how near she was coming.

"Ay, ay, sir, I only seek an anchorage astern," answered Rita, in a voice that surprised her crew by its deep tone.

As she spoke she edged a little nearer her intended prize, and then, as she swept by, suddenly put her helm hard down and cried in a voice that thrilled her men:

"Ready about! Boarders, do your duty!"

The lugger swept around swiftly, and was laid alongside of the anchored craft, with a thump that forced the other to swing out of her way; but not until Argyle and his men had gained a footing upon her decks.

But the lugger forged ahead of the prize, and shot on her way, the wind catching her sails and driving her along on the other tack.

"Ho, lady, there comes a blow," shouted one of the men, and a glance to seaward showed Rita that a sudden storm was sweeping down upon them, which before they had not noticed, and which, in fact, as is common with gales in that latitude, came up with almost lightning velocity.

Rita took in the situation at a glance.

She knew her lugger would never stand up under the sail then on her, and that her first duty would be to get her as near under bare poles as quickly as possible.

It had been her intention to put about and again run alongside of the prize.

But instead she shouted out in seaman-like tones:

"Strip the lugger of her sail, lads, and then clew up and set what she will bear."

The men sprung nimbly to their work, and as the lugger once more neared the prize, Rita cried:

"Ho, Argyle!"

"Ay, ay, Lady Captain," came the response, and it was evident that though the young officer replied promptly, he had hot work on board, for the crew of the prize were making a stout resistance.

"Get up your anchor and follow me out to sea with all haste," ordered Rita, as the lugger swept by within easy pistol-shot range.

"Ay, ay, lady," and following the words of the officer came a cheer, and the firing and clashing of steel ceased.

How the fight had ended, Rita was momentarily at a loss to know, until again she heard the mate's voice, shouting:

"Up with that mud-hook, lads, and clew up those sails, for we must get out of this."

The men on the flying lugger gave a cheer as these words reached them, for it told them that their comrades had been victorious, and then they turned their attention to the safety of their own vessel, for the blow was now upon them in full force.

But, calling a man to the helm to aid her, Rita met the shock with perfect nerve, and though the little vessel staggered under the shock, she soon recovered and went bounding away on her course directly out of the harbor toward the open sea.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LADY CAPTAIN AT BAY.

THE lugger of the Lady Captain was well stripped of sail to meet the storm, which was very violent in its fury, and held well in hand went flying down toward the open Gulf at a rate of speed that greatly pleased Rita, and caused her to say:

"If the prize can sail faster than this craft, then we we will have a vessel to be proud of."

"She can do it, lady, for there she comes," cried the man who stood at the helm with her, and who, in casting his eyes astern, had discerned a vessel coming in their wake at a tremendous pace.

"It is the prize, and she is gaining," cried

Rita with joy, and calling a seaman to take her place at the helm, she turned her attention wholly to the coming vessel.

It was without doubt the prize, for a flash of lightning revealed that, and she was certainly gaining rapidly, and with no more sail set than was upon her craft she was following.

Watching her attentively, Rita discerned that at the pace at which the prize was going, she would run by her within half an hour's time, add then drop them out of sight, for Argyll could not reduce sail, and she dared not increase it on her lugger.

Standing to leeward, as Argyll showed an inclination to pass to the lee, she waited for the prize to come within hail.

It did not take long for the prize to draw up, and when her bow came even with the stern of Rita's craft, the Lady Captain saw that the mate had come forward the better to have a talk with her, which he did as his own vessel forged ahead.

"Well, lady, I have your prize," he said cheerily.

"Yes, and you cut her out grandly, senor."

"Thank you, Lady Captain, but I lost several of my men."

"But I put the prisoners in a small boat and set them free."

"You did right, Argyll; but how fast you are leaving us."

"Yes, lady, she sails like a witch of the wind; but where will I find you if I lose you in the storm, for it is black as night outside, and this blow is not over?"

"Meet me off the Chandealeurs."

"Ay, ay, Lady Captain, I will be there," and the prize swept on out of hailing distance to the great delight of Rita, who muttered:

"I will now have a vessel for my dear father that is the superior of the Brandt yacht and Sea Owl."

In a short while the prize had disappeared from sight, and Rita once more took her place at the helm, using a tiller-rope to aid her, while she sent the men forward to see that all was ship-shape before running outside.

They went silently to obey the order, but after quite a long while Rita saw them by the lightning's flash grouped together, evidently engaged in talking over some important scheme.

Ever suspicious, having been raised in an atmosphere of suspicion, she at once suspected foul play, and instantly determined to act.

Almost within reach of her hand, down the companionway, hung her belt of arms, and lashing the tiller quickly she sprung down the companionway and seized them, at once returning to her post.

Then she stood in silence watching and waiting, and unable to put up with the suspense, was about to call out to the men to come aft, when another flash of the vivid lightning revealed the crew coming aft in a body.

"Now what will happen?" she muttered; but she was perfectly calm, and determined to meet the trouble boldly, if trouble there was.

The crew now approached, five in number, and confronted her.

They would have come nearer, but for her words:

"Halt there, men, and let me know what you have to say?"

Involuntarily they stopped and stood in a line before her, just as the lugger began to feel the heavier waves rolling in from the Gulf.

"I'll tell yer, lady, just what it is," said one of the men, acting as spokesman, and then he hesitated.

"That is just what I asked you to do, and I am waiting," was Rita's response, coolly uttered, while she put her helm a little to starboard.

"Well, lady, it don't seem exactly squar' ter go back on a woman, an' a pretty one at that; but then we is poor sailors, and has our living to 'arn, and we don't want to let no chance go by to get a good sum when it passes right through our hands."

"I told you that you had enlisted for free work that would pay you well, though the danger was great!"

"If you are cowards, when I reach the prize, I shall gladly let you all go."

"It is not that, lady; but you see we has it in our power to get big money."

"As how, for instance?" asked Rita, with the same calmness of manner with which she had before spoken, and which seemed to disconcert the men.

"This lugger, lady, has done a pirate act to-night, in cutting out a vessel at anchor in a Government port."

"I am aware of that."

"And, lady, the prize has run on to the Chandealeur Islands to wait for you, so we sees our chance to make our fortunes, for we can carry this lugger back to port, tell the Don just where to get his yacht back again, and the mate, seeing this craft coming with us five on board, won't suspect that we have some score or more with the Don below decks, and we can capture her easy."

"Then the Don will pay us well, besides our getting this lugger as our prize, while we knows that you has about ten thousand dollars on

board, besides some jewels we has seen you wear, and all this will bring us a snug lump all round as you can see."

"Ah! you intend to rob me, seize the lugger, and get paid for the recapture of my prize?" and Rita's cool manner made the men a trifle uneasy; but the spokesman said:

"Yes, lady, that is it."

"And what do you intend to do with me?"

"We has thought of that, lady, and we won't harm you, but will land you all right before we go to the Don, and give you some money, too."

"You are very kind, lads, and my advice to you is to begin your infamous work at once."

The men looked at Rita, then at each other, and then all eyes fell upon the spokesman.

"I hates it for you, lady, but we has to look out for ourselves; and so just give me the tiller, and don't make us be rude to you."

As the man spoke he stepped forward, but with the lightning's flash came a red glare and the report of a pistol, and the mutineer fell heavily to the deck and rolled to leeward, while in a voice that arose above the howling winds, the Lady Captain cried:

"Back, you cowardly mutineers, and do not dare me further!"

It was a grand picture, there on that storm-swept craft, to see the Lady Captain standing at bay, one hand grasping the tiller, against which she also threw her weight, the craft careening far over to leeward as she bounded along under close-reefed sails, the dead mutineer dashed against the lee bulwark, and the other four shrinking back before the muzzle of the pistol that covered them, threatening them with instant death—yes, a grand picture, with a woman the controlling spirit of the wild scene.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MUTINEERS' PLOT.

"LADS, we have caught a gal Tartar!"

With this cry from one of the four seamen, all of them fell back hastily from before the muzzle of that deadly weapon, held in the unflinching hand of the Lady Captain.

Nor did her temporary success cause her to lose her nerve, for she at once took advantage of her triumph to call out:

"To your posts, men, and do your duty, or this craft and all on board of it will go down beneath yonder mountain waves!"

She pointed with her pistol, as she spoke, out over the sea, which the lightning revealed as wild and wind-swept in the extreme; and just then the lugger shot out from beneath the lee of the coast shelter, and at once plunged her sharp bows into the huge waves that rolled landward.

The men saw their danger and they quickly sprung to their posts, while one called out:

"Ther lugger 'll swamp, lady, so yer better put back!"

"The lugger ahead has gone out, and where it can live I will follow," was the plucky response of Rita.

But, finding the helm more than she could manage, even with the tiller lashings, she called out:

"Two of you come here!"

Instantly the four of them started.

"Back! two of you!"

The command was obeyed and two of the four drew near.

"Take that helm, and remember, I shall kill you if you disobey my slightest order, or leave it without my permission."

"Forward there!"

"Ay, ay, lady!"

"If either of you even come aft I shall shoot you down without mercy."

With this she relinquished the helm to the two men, and not a moment too soon, for it took their united strength to hold the lugger on her course.

Taking her position in the companionway entrance, where she would be partially protected from the wind and spray, and holding a pistol ready in hand, she directed the helmsmen which course to steer, while she also kept her eyes roving forward to see that she was not surprised by those who were amidsthips.

Fortunately for Rita the men on board with her had not been armed, Argyll arming only those who had boarded the Don's yacht with him.

In this the woman held a great advantage, for reckless men that they were, and with the amount of gold before their eyes, which they knew they could gain by her death, some one of them would have been willing to have shot her down.

But, awed by her fatal aim at their ring-leader, and his death, and the bold air she maintained afterward, they were very willing to let the matter drop, at least for the present.

Also, they were well aware that a mistake then would be fatal to the vessel, which had to be well managed to live in that wild sea, and, possessing more confidence in her than in themselves they were willing to let her retain the upper hand, hoping that, when the storm swept over, some accident, or mistake on her part would put them in control.

Thus the time went by, the lugger bounding

upon her course and proving a splendid sea boat.

Rita watched the lugger, the sails, the waves, the men, and with eyes that allowed nothing to escape them.

When she saw that the two men at the helm were fagged out, she took a pistol in each hand and called to the others to come forward and relieve them.

They obeyed in silence, and the two thus freed were ordered forward.

If the men expected to tire her out, they soon found they were mistaken, for she kept her stand without once seeming to feel fatigue.

By degrees the storm blew itself out; but still the situation on board the lugger did not change, for Rita held the crew cowed, and seemed determined to so keep them.

At length the dawn broke, and the lugger still held in her way, driving straight for the Chandealeur Island rendezvous, and at a pace that would bring her there before very long.

Thus the hours passed, no sail in sight, no land visible, only that lugger bounding along.

At length the wind had decreased to only a brisk breeze, and Rita ordered the men from the helm and more sail set.

She took the tiller herself now, and sent them forward to the forecabin to give her strained nerves a rest, though the tax on her physical strength was great.

And so the day passed, until when the sun set clear, one of the men came aft, and saluting politely said:

"You has weakened us, lady, and we asks your pardon, and wants to act right."

"You get forward, sir, with your comrades, or there will be one less in this lugger's crew."

"Quick! for I am not to be deceived and put off my guard."

"Tell your comrades that I intend to run this craft to the Chandealeurs and find the prize; but if she is not there, I shall then sail for a port where you will meet just punishment."

"Now sir, obey me, and the man who comes aft of amidsthips, without my order, will die right there in his tracks."

"But, Lady Captain, we—"

"Go, sir!"

The pistol was again leveled and the mutineer seaman went forward with an alacrity that raised a laugh at his expense among his comrades.

"What did she say, Jack?" asked one.

"Well, she intends to find the prize or run us all into some port where we'll stretch hemp."

"But she can't last much longer without eating and sleeping."

"Can't she? Now that girl is a forty day faster on the sea, you can bet, and as for sleep, her eyes are as bright as the diamonds she wears."

"I tell you, messmates, we made a bad break with her."

"Yes, but if we had a weapon besides our knives, we'd have it our way."

"Maybe," said one, while another remarked:

"Suppose we rush on her in a body."

"Well, two of us will die certain, and as I don't know just which those two will be, I'll say no."

"She would get flurried and miss us."

"Now you try it on if you think so; but just look over in the lee scuppers at that heap of humanity that was our messmate last night."

The man glanced at the dead body, shuddered, and no longer urged his plan to capture the daring woman.

But another said excitedly:

"Messmates, I have it!"

All turned quickly toward him.

"There is the hatch, and we can carry it before us, as soon as it is dark, and thus get right to her side, for bullets won't penetrate that."

The idea was greeted with a suppressed cheer, and the four men congratulated themselves upon having at last found a way to overpower the brave woman at bay at the lugger helm.

CHAPTER XX.

THWARTED.

THE low cheer of the mutineers put Rita at once on her guard.

It told her that some plan had been decided upon to get the best of her.

Night was coming on, but it would be clear and starlight, and the wind was blowing only a brisk breeze, while the sea was no longer wild.

She was hungry, tired, drowsy and wretched, but her courage and nerve remained firm, and she would die at her post before she was conquered.

By the morning she knew she would be among the Chandealeurs, and meet the prize.

If not, she would run straight for the Owl's Nest to her father, who, she did not doubt, would make short work of the mutineers.

But alarmed by the cheer of the men, she at once began to watch them.

She saw two of them spring to the heavy forward hatch and raise it.

Instantly she divined their purpose, and lashing the tiller, she darted down into the cabin.

There was a trap-hatch right at the foot of the companionway, and this she threw open.

Then seizing the lamp she darted back to the tiller, the men just then looking up, as the lugger began to change her course.

They saw her there, however, and watched her closely in the uncertain light, while one remarked:

"Messmates, the gal left the helm I am sure, and she's up to some mischief."

"She can't do nothing, so let us move now with the hatch," said another.

The hatch was about five feet square, built of stout planks, and large enough to conceal the four men in a stooping position, when it was stood on end.

Nailing clamps on, the four men grasped them, and began to move slowly aft, pushing the hatch before them as a shield.

They took the port side, which was to leeward and advanced slowly.

Rita saw them start, and stood firm.

She watched their every movement, and she knew that her bullets would never penetrate the thick wood of the hatch.

Still she did not flinch, and held the lugger on her course, the tiller against her hip, and holding something in her hands.

At last the men got amidships, and halted.

They were anxious about the silence of the woman, and wanted her to fire upon them.

They knew that she had but two pistols, one a double-barrel weapon, and the other a single shot weapon; but they also knew her aim, and felt that three of the four must fall, if she got a chance to fire upon them.

Watching her, they saw her keep her place at the tiller; but as they could learn nothing by standing still, they once more moved on.

It was their intention to push the hatch close up against the girl, and then force her from the helm, and seize her.

It seemed to the four mutineers that their plan must work well, for what could she do against them?

But suddenly, as they got aft of amidships, they came to a sudden halt, as a light flashed over the deck, and then, as they peeped over the hatch, they beheld the Lady Captain still standing at her post.

One hand held the tiller, the other held the cabin lamp, and it was raised above her head, while its flickering light cast weird shadows over the deck.

Then in the Lady Captain's ringing voice came the words:

"Drop that hatch, mutineers, and back to the forecabin, for I have opened the trap in the cabin, and will hurl this lamp into the powder magazine!"

With a yell of fright the three men dropped the hatch and bounded forward, hiding themselves in the forecabin.

A burst of laughter came from the Lady Captain at their frightened stampede, and setting the lamp down in the companionway, for further use if needed, she again devoted herself to the work of steering.

Again, standing her lonely, terrible watch, the Lady Captain counted the minutes as they went by and formed hours, longing for the day to come.

At last the eastern horizon grew gray, then rosy-tinted, and day broke, with the sun soon rising above the waters.

One sweeping, anxious glance the Lady Captain cast about her, and a cry broke from her lips as the Chandeurs were visible, and shooting out from behind one of them a trim lugger that could be no other than the prize.

The men she saw forward, and they were uneasy, but stood in dogged silence gazing out over the waters, while Rita altered her course, and headed for the stranger.

A closer look told her that the strange sail was none other than the prize.

In half an hour the two vessels were near together, and both luffing up, Argyll came on board, for Rita had hailed:

"Come on board, senior, for I have some mutineers here for you to put in irons."

"Great God, lady, what has happened?" cried the officer, as he beheld the white, haggard face of Rita.

"The crew mutinied, senior. I killed the one lying yonder, and have kept the others at bay ever since I followed you to sea."

"Mutinied, and against you, a woman?"

"Yes, they were tempted by the gold they knew I had on board, and intended to put back, tell the Don where to find his yacht, and thus get a reward and this lugger too."

"Lady Captain, you are a woman among a million, for few men could have done what you have."

"But what is your will regarding these mutineers?"

"I will leave their fate to my father, for we will sail now to his retreat."

"Your father?"

"Yes, I am Rita, the Sea Owl's daughter."

"Ha! this is indeed news, Lady Rita; but do you think it wise to trust the men with the secret, now that some of them have shown the cloven foot?"

"Oh yes, for they can do no harm, and I know that my father needs both vessels and men."

"As for you, senior, you shall command the prize you have so gallantly taken!"

"It will be time enough to talk of that afterward, Lady Captain; but now let me urge that you go on board the yacht, which is perfect in every appointment, and I will take the lugger with these mutineers in irons, and two men to aid me."

"You need rest and must have it."

"I feel that I do, and I will take your advice, Senior Argyll," and Rita went toward the lugger-yacht, and was soon fast asleep, while the two vessels set sail for the retreat of the Sea Owl.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SEA OWL AT HOME.

CAPTAIN RESTEL deeply felt the absence of his daughter, from his lonely retreat.

He was a silent, stern man, unbending only to his child, and the old negro and negress, the links that bound him to the past, and when he found that they alone were left to welcome him on his return from a voyage, he was wont to have them both in his cabin of evenings to talk to.

Loving Rita as he had, he had hoped that she would not marry; but, when he saw that she loved Barton Keys with her whole soul, and knowing the intensity of her nature, he was determined that she should then wed the man of her own choice.

In their interview in the cabin Barton Keys had tried to get out of marrying Rita, urging various reasons; but the Sea Owl was implacable.

He said that his daughter loved the man, in spite of his sins, that she was beautiful, accomplished in a measure, and that Barton Keys could take his choice and marry her, or he could go back to the jail he had left.

If the latter he would quickly die on the gallows.

If the former, he would gain a beautiful, rich and loving wife, be made captain of a fine armed schooner to carry on his piracy in, and be enabled to carry out his revengeful ideas against those he so bitterly hated.

Of course the desperate man chose life and the smuggler's daughter, as the reader has seen, and found himself becoming more and more interested in his lovely bride the more he knew her.

As for the Sea Owl, he returned to his lonely haunt, as I have said, and began to brood over the loss he had met with.

Then misfortune came upon him, for the Lady Rita, Irving Brandt's captured yacht, was captured with her booty, and a second of his vessels sunk in a storm with all on board, and his fleet, with the loss of the lugger Sea Owl, left in exchange for the Lady Maud, had been reduced to two carrier vessels, and they were not the fleetest ones among the little outlaw craft by any means.

It was while brooding over the loss of his sunken vessel one night, and the absence of Rita, that his faithful Indian spy suddenly appeared in the cabin of his Home Lugger.

"Well, Chincopin, you are back again!" he cried, delighted at the return of the Indian, whom he had sent to Mobile on business to his agent.

"Chincopin back, but don't bring good talk," replied the Indian.

"Ha! what has gone wrong now?" cried the Sea Owl sternly.

"White cap'n stop at big plantation, get whip bad by Sea Fox!"

"What are you saying?"

"Chincopin talk heap straight."

"Well, you talk heap crooked to my hearing, for who has been whipped?"

"White boat chief."

"Barto?"

"That him."

"Where?"

"At big plantation."

"All these plantations are big, so which one was it?"

"White chief plantation."

"Ah! Colonel Brandt's?"

"That him."

"Curse Barto! what was he doing there?"

"Chincopin think he want steal."

"Doubtless; but what had the Sea Fox to do with it?"

"Him there."

"The Sea Fox was there?"

"Yes, him whip other boat chief."

"Now, this is news; but Barto deserves it for landing at Brandt's plantation and attempting to carry off that girl, for that is just what he was after; but he had better not make Rita jealous, for if her love turns to hate, there will have to be a new commander appointed over the Sea Ghoul schooner."

"Well, Chincopin, this is not pleasant news; but what became of Captain Barto?"

"Him run quick, go out on big water."

"And the Sea Fox?"

"Him go back to boat, then take big ship follow other white boat chief."

"Yes; that romantic pirate is coming his sentimental nonsense again in protecting the dwellers along the coast."

"Well, I hope Barto did not fight him, for Palafox is hard to whip, and if he liked the Sea Ghoul better than his own schooner, why he'd take it."

This the Sea Owl said more to himself than to the Indian, whom he now asked:

"Did you see my agent in Mobile, Chincopin?"

"Chincopin see him; here letter," and the Indian handed the Sea Owl a letter, which he hastily broke the seal of and read.

"Curse the Jew! he has sold my goods at a lower price than I thought; well, I'm getting blows on all sides now; but who is that, Chincopin?"

The Indian sprung up the companionway, to see who had arrived on board the lugger, for a boat had been heard to come alongside, and a moment after a seaman entered and saluted the Sea Owl.

It was the man who had been captured on the smuggler yacht and proven traitor, and had betrayed to Irving Brandt who Rita Restel really was. Not only had he gained his freedom by his treachery, but afterward had made a secret compact with Irving, the result of which will develop in good time.

"Well, Leon, it is you?" cried the Sea Owl, recognizing one of his favorite men.

"Yes, Senior Captain, what there is left of me," answered the man.

"Ha! has harm befallen the yacht that I sent you to New Orleans in with a cargo?"

"Yes, senior."

"Furies! what is it, man?" and Captain Restel sprung to his feet, and grasped the seaman by each shoulder.

"I'll tell you, captain, and in a hurry, for your grip is a savage one," said Leon, wincing under the grasp of the Sea Owl.

"Well, out with it, man!" and Captain Restel again threw himself into his chair.

"Well, sir, the yacht was carrying her cargo to Orleans, as you ordered, when we sighted the Pirate Priest, and she ran down, hailed us, and put the Lady Rita and lots of booty on board, with orders to go on to the city."

"Ha! this is strange; but, Leon, did my daughter go willingly?"

"Oh, yes, sir; for she had charge of the booty, which was worth a fortune."

"And then?"

"And then, captain, we went on our way, but we sighted off the Chandeurs our old lugger, the Sea Owl, and she gave chase."

"It was no use, sir, for with the larger spars and more canvas that boy planter put on the Sea Owl, she just walked right after us at a pace that brought us to in a short time."

"Why did you not use your guns?"

"We did, sir, and that boy captain used his, and we got our bowsprit shot away and were taken, for our force was very small as you know, captain."

"Well, what then?"

"We were carried round to the city, sir, as a prize, and—"

"My, poor child!" groaned the smuggler.

"Oh, sir, she was all right, for Master Brandt let her go free, and I made my escape, while the rest of the lads went in irons on board of a war vessel."

"And where is my child?"

"I do not know, sir, but I suppose she is in the city, waiting for a chance to join her husband, or to come home to you."

"Well, if they did not search her she will have ample means, at any rate, and if not, she knows that I deal with Rudolpho and she can go to him."

"But I am anxious about her, and I shall start for the city in the morning, and you, Leon, I wish to accompany me."

"Certainly, captain," was the answer, and Leon left the lugger for the craft where the men had quarters while he muttered:

"Yes, I'll accompany you, captain Restel, and take good care not to desert you until I sell you to that boy captain."

CHAPTER XXII.

A SURPRISE.

TRUE to his determination of the night before, the Sea Owl started for New Orleans the following morning, accompanied by Leon, Chincopin the Indian, and a couple of seamen.

They went in a small drogher, a fishing-smack, and all were attired as the ordinary lake fishermen, carrying nets, hooks and only the paraphernalia of such an occupation.

Beneath the cabin flooring, however, Captain Restel carried hidden away, a few bales of costly merchandise for he never let an opportunity slip to turn into ready gold any smuggled booty that he had on hand, and the hiding place of his treasure thus gained only Rita and the Indian knew of besides himself, for Chincopin was most thoroughly trusted by the Sea Owl.

The smack was poled out of the lagoon at an early hour, and had just begun to feel the billows of the deep waters under her bow, when Leon sung out:

"Sail, ho!"

"Yes, I see it, and it is—"

"Sail, ho!"

Again Leon called out the stirring words to a sailor's ears.

"Hal two of them, as I live, and both luggers, with the one leading as trim a craft as I ever saw."

"Who are they, and what are they, Leon?"

"Well, sir, the one leading looks like the craft the Mississippi river planters keep for pleasure cruising, and the second one is certainly a trim craft for a freighter; but is it a chase, sir?"

"I think not, Leon, for the one in advance has less sail set than the one astern— Hal is that not a signal to us?"

"Yes, sir, it seems so."

At this moment a string of flags went up on the leading lugger, and Captain Restel read them aloud.

"Sea Owl ahoy!"

Instantly he picked up his glass and leveled it upon the signaling craft, and then cried:

"Put away for that lugger, Leon, for yonder stands my daughter on her deck—I would know her among a thousand."

The little smack's course was then changed, from running along the coast, to seaward, and in a short while the lugger luffed up, and waited her coming.

Running alongside the Sea Owl sprung on board and the next moment clasped his daughter in his arms, while he cried:

"My child, my child, again I have you near me."

"But yonder lugger in chase, this craft, your being here, what does it all mean?"

"I will tell you, father, in a very few words; but is not that Leon in the smack?" and her eyes fell upon the traitor seaman.

"Yes, Rita."

"Has he not told you what happened, for he was on the Lady Rita?"

"Yes, he told me of her capture, and yours, and we were but now on our way to the city to find you."

"Well, father, while we run in to the basin I will tell you all that I can of what has happened."

"But yonder vessel coming down astern?"

"Is my craft, sir, or rather yours, for I will present her to you, along with this one, while you shall know how I became possessed of both."

"I fear you have had a hard time of it, Rita, for you look pale and haggard."

"I have had a hard time, father, but I forget all now, when I am once more at home; but what of the schooner?"

"Barto, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I have not seen him."

"Nor heard of him?"

"Yes, and he made a fool of himself."

"In what way, father, for surely he has not—"

"No, no, now don't get frightened, for there is no reason for it, as Barto is safe, only he made a silly attack on the Brandt Plantation."

"Father! did my husband carry off Miss Brandt?" and the eyes of Rita flashed with a dangerous fire.

"No, he did not, for that Knight of the Ocean, the Sea Fox, whipped him off, and he did no damage."

"Barto did wrong to go against my wishes," calmly said Rita, and then, as the lugger held on its way, she told her father of her adventures, and that, having lost his best smuggling vessel, she determined to get him another, and so cut the prize out, which, with the craft astern, she made him a present of.

"Well, my child, I owe it to you that I have a fleet again, and I verily believe that this craft can show a clean pair of heels to any vessel I ever had, while the one in her wake is certainly a rapid sailer, too."

"And, father, the young man of whom I spoke, Argyle, I wish you would make your lieutenant, for he is well deserving of it; and I am sure you can trust him thoroughly."

"I will do as you wish, Rita, and have a talk with him as soon as we drop anchor."

"If he has pluck, I will soon test, for I intend that those mutineers shall suffer punishment, for they richly deserve it."

"They do, indeed, father; but, as there is no one on board that lugger to pilot her in, suppose we signal that we will send a man on board, and order Leon back?"

"A good idea, my child," and the lugger was signaled, but instantly back came the answer:

"I do not need a pilot, for I will follow you in."

"That sounds well, for the fellow has nerve, and I will let him run in alone," said the Sea Owl, and the two vessels now headed for the channel among the shoals, the follower pursuing the course of the leader without a mistake; and shooting into the lagoon only a few cables' length behind her.

Then the boats were gotten out ahead, and the two luggers now dropped anchor in Owl's Nest Basin.

CHAPTER XXII.

MERCILESS.

In the cabin of the Home Lugger sat the Sea Owl, Rita and Argyle, the young officer who had so ably served the smuggler's daughter.

The Sea Owl was pleased with his appearance, had thanked him for his services, and invited him to supper with them.

The meal had been concluded, the dishes cleaned away by the old negress, and then Captain Restel said:

"Senor Argyle, my daughter is desirous that I should take you into my service as an officer."

"What do you think about it?"

"I will endeavor to prove my appreciation of your confidence, Captain Restel, by doing my whole duty," was the proud response.

"It is a life of danger, senor."

"I do not fear to face danger."

"We smugglers are being treated now as pirates when we are taken."

"Yes, sir, so I observed in the affair of the captain of the crew of the vessel your daughter was taken on; they were at once put in irons to be tried for their lives."

"And are doubtless by this time strung up; but I need more men, and I will be glad to have you and your crew, if you think you can depend upon them."

"There is little confidence to be placed in any man in our lawless lives, Senor Sea Owl; but I believe that I can trust them as you might the general run of mankind, who were for their own interests."

"And yet those fellows of your crew multiplied against my daughter."

"True, but outlaws are seldom so tempted as they were, for each one would have made a handsome sum by the recapture of the prize, the seizing of the lugger, and robbery of your daughter."

"You do not excuse them?"

"Certainly not, only I say that there was reason for their treachery, which a few thousand dollars never would have caused them to be guilty of."

"And what punishment do you think they deserve, senor?"

"Death," was the calm reply.

"Then you have pronounced their doom, for they shall die," sternly said the Sea Owl.

Argyle made no reply to this, and calling the Indian, who was on deck, the Sea Owl said:

"Have those mutineers brought here to my cabin, Chincopin!"

The Indian departed and soon returned with a guard, and the traitors heavily ironed.

They were very pale, and evidently expected bitter punishment, for they were now well aware into whose hands they had fallen.

"Traitors, I wished to look at your faces, to see how men look, who would betray the trust you had placed in you," sternly said the Sea Owl, and he turned his angry eyes upon each face before him.

But not a man of the party spoke, and they hung their heads in silence, and Restel again said:

"You proved yourselves cowards, traitors and assassins, for you would have slain that girl, had she not cowed you by fear of your own lives, and I leave it for her to pronounce your doom."

"That is our captain, and neither you or the gal has a right to say what has to be done with us," cried one of the men boldly, and he pointed to Argyle.

"I am an officer under the Sea Owl, men, and he has the authority over you," responded the young seaman.

"I will leave it then to your own officer, who trusted you, and which trust you betrayed, to say what shall be your fate."

"You will not kill us, sir?" cried one of the men imploringly, and the others all turned their eyes beseechingly upon him.

"I have said that you should die as a punishment for your crime, for if men in our lawless lives will not serve us from a common interest and the good of all, they must be made to do so from the fear of death," said Argyle, calmly.

"Well said, young senor," cried the Sea Owl, while Argyle continued:

"Your act was not against me, but worse than if it had been, for you were cowardly enough to attack this lady, and in her hands I leave your fate, and what she decides you will have to abide by."

As he spoke he glanced toward Rita, who had been sitting silently, regarding the faces of the mutineers, and recalling how they had made her suffer all those long and dreary hours and days.

Thus addressed, she looked toward Argyle, but still making no reply, the Sea Owl said:

"My daughter, you hear what the senor has said, so it rests with you what to do with these men."

"I am revengeful, father," she answered in a low tone.

"And you suffered much at their hands, Rita?"

"Yes, father."

"Then what shall be their punishment, Rita,"

for their lives are in your hands?" asked the Sea Owl.

"They must die at the yard-arm," was the stern answer that broke from the lips of the Lady Captain.

"Mercy, Lady Captain, mercy!" came in a chorus from the lips of the doomed men.

But white-faced, stern, and with eyes that seemed to burn them, Rita sat gazing upon them, not one particle of mercy in her countenance.

"Mercy, lady, mercy!" begged the men; but in reply came the words:

"Leon, lead those men off, and let them be shot at sunrise, on the deck of the prize vessel, which I will name the Sea Owl, and thus baptize her decks in the blood of traitors."

The doomed men then were led away, shrieking for mercy which would not be vouchsafed them, and at sunrise the following morning Rita sprung from her berth as a volley of musketry pealed in her ears, awakening her with a start.

But the old negress saw her and called out from her point of observation in the cabin companionway:

"Don't git skeert, Missy Rita, for it am on'y dem bad mens what wanted ter kill you, bein' exekooted as dey 'sarves ter be."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RACE AT SEA.

The first duty of the young smuggler lieutenant, Argyle, after the execution of the mutineers, was by no means an unpleasant one to him, for it was to carry Rita back to her pirate husband.

The fact was, Rita was anxious about her husband, for his attack upon the Brandt Plantation had been, she felt confident, for the purpose of carrying off Maud.

Though she knew that Maud had gone to New Orleans to live, still she felt that, in disguise, Barton Keys could visit her there, and, if he could get her in his power, might do so.

Thus feeling, Rita told her father of her intention to join the Sea Ghoul, which she knew was due within the week off the Balize.

The Sea Owl bade her take the prize lugger, and Argyle to command her, and within a few hours after the craft set sail, a dozen men on board as crew.

The new Sea Owl certainly proved itself a stanch and very fast vessel, and made the run to the Balize in exceptionally quick time.

Hardly had they reached the vicinity where they expected to find the schooner, when the lookout shouted:

"Sail ho!"

"It is the schooner," cried Rita, as she beheld a vessel running out of a small inlet.

"Shall I signal her, lady?"

"No, Senor Argyle, I see that she has already discovered us, and is coming in chase, so we will find out just what the Sea Owl can do to escape her."

Argyle was pleased at the prospect of a race that was on one side a chase in earnest, and at once put about, calling the crew to crowd sail upon the lugger.

The wind was blowing fresh, an eight-knot breeze for an ordinary sailer, but the lugger went bowling along at a pace that showed she was logging twelve knots out of it.

Astern, a trifle under a league, the schooner came rushing along with every sail set that would draw.

She had no flag set, but now, as she saw that the lugger was not so easily picked up, she fired a gun and hoisted the stars and stripes.

"Oh, no, Captain Barto, you can't fool us," said Rita, with a laugh, and soon after a second shot came whizzing after them, but the schooner was too far away to do any harm.

"We are gaining, Lady Captain," cried Argyle in glee.

"We certainly are, and they discover the fact on the schooner, for see, they are setting extra sails, and wetting the canvas to make the pressure greater; but all to no use, Captain Barto," and Rita became really gay under the excitement of the moment.

After a run of half an hour longer, when the lugger had proved without cavil what she could do with the schooner in that breeze, Rita said:

"Now, Senor Argyle, let us give Captain Barto a surprise, by putting back toward the schooner."

This was done, and it was evident that those on the schooner were indeed surprised, for the crew were seen rapidly moving to quarters, and taking in extra sail, while the guns were run out for action.

What it could mean when a little lugger that had run from them, and just one-fourth the size of the schooner, and which had readily out-footed them, should now be putting back, those on the schooner could not understand.

Was there some trick in it?

Had she a couple of heavy guns not visible from the schooner?

Had she a hundred good tars hidden beneath her decks?

Did her commander intend to receive the schooner's fire and carry her by boarding,

trusting in the superior numbers beneath his decks?"

Had her commander come to the conclusion that the schooner was, after all, an American cruiser and had put back to her?

Such were the questions the buccaneers asked each other, without any one being able to give a correct answer.

"Show the American flag, Senor Argyle," ordered Rita, and up fluttered the colors.

Instantly they were again set on the schooner.

"Now the Spanish flag, senor."

The Spanish ensign went up and the schooner followed suit.

"Now we'll fool him, for please hoist the Don's private flag, senor, which we found on board."

This was done, and as the schooner could not follow suit, and the lugger was now within easy range, the cross and cutlass flag, with its other emblems, went up to the peak.

But, to the surprise of the pirates, the lugger did not seem in the least alarmed, but came bowling along without the slightest change of course, when it had been expected that she would put about and once more trust to her heels.

The pirate captain, seeing the daring of the little lugger, and expecting an attack by boarders, sent his men to their guns to commence firing.

This Rita, who was closely watching through her glass, at once saw, and she called out:

"Quick! down with that Don's flag, and up with the Sea Owl colors."

Almost instantly the blue field, with a huge black owl in the center, went up over the lugger.

And not an instant too soon, for the schooner was just luffing for a broadside.

But the Sea Owl colors, well known to Barton Keys, told that the lugger belonged to the Smuggler King, as Captain Restel was also called, and a cheer broke from the pirate crew, while up to the fore of the schooner went a similar flag.

In a little while longer the two vessels luffed up and a boat left the schooner's side to board the lugger.

In it was Barton Keys, who had already recognized his bride standing upon the deck of the little vessel that had so worried him, and as he went over the side Rita sprang forward to greet him, while she cried:

"Forgive me, Barto, for the joke I played on you, but I wanted to try the speed of my little lugger."

"You are forgiven, Rita, for I find I have captured a prize after all, in my wife coming back to me," was the gallant reply; but the frown upon the face of the buccaneer chief, and which Rita did not see, gave the lie to his words.

CHAPTER XXV.

A Foe That Was Remembered.

BARTON KEYS had gone to the vicinity of the rendezvous, appointed near the Balize, because he expected news from Rita of the booty she had taken to New Orleans, though he hoped that his wife would not meet him there.

He hoped this, as he feared she might have heard of his attack on the Brandt Plantation, immediately after her departure from his vessel; and more, he had determined to himself visit the city to discover if there was not some chance of getting Maud Brandt in his clutches.

Could he do this, it was his intention to desert Rita, force Maud to marry him, and then seek other seas in which to flaunt his pirate flag, only changing it from the cross and cutlass colors, so that his fate might remain a mystery, and it be supposed that the Pirate Priest had gone down some night of storm with all his crew to the depths of the Gulf.

It was therefore with regret that he beheld Rita on the lugger, and heard her say that she had come back to join him.

He had found her most companionable while she had been with him, and she had shared his troubles, his triumphs, and been a great comfort in his lonely hours; but, woman though she was, and one who fairly fascinated him, he was yet afraid of her.

There was that in her nature that would not stand trifling, and he read it so.

There was that about her that showed she would be very dangerous if she was wronged, and, try to throw off the feeling as he might, it would take possession of him.

Not seeing what was passing in his mind, Rita had given her husband a warm greeting, and then, in a few words, told him of her capture, release, cutting out of the lugger from its anchorage, and the mutiny on the home run.

Barton Keys listened in silence to all, and then said:

"Well, Rita, you are a heroine and have done nobly; but who is that fine-looking young man yonder?" and he pointed to the young smuggler lieutenant, who was engaged in some duty amidships, and seemingly in no degree anxious to meet the famous pirate chief.

"Oh! that is the young man whom Rudolpho got for me in New Orleans, and he it was who cut this lugger out so bravely."

"His name is Argyle—here, Senor Argyle, I wish to have you meet my husband."

The young officer fairly started at her words, but came aft with a bold step, though his face had suddenly become very pale.

"Argyle, you say the senor's name is, Rita?"

"I think I know him better than you do, and I greet him with a warm welcome."

"How do you do, Chester Granger?"

"To wear a mask longer, Barton Keys, is useless, for either you or I, for I see in you not the one I deemed the Pirate Priest, but one who, as my pretended friend, made me what I now am," and the smuggler spoke in a bold tone, while he fearlessly faced the pirate chief who he said had been his ruin.

Barton Keys smiled; but it was not a pleasant smile, and turning to his wife he said:

"Rita, this gentleman and myself were once bosom friends."

"We lived fast, gambled, and entered upon a little plot together that ended in the death of one we owed large gambling debts to, and put another, the prisoner now below decks, in jail as his murderer."

"You are aware that Bradford Carr, that prisoner, escaped, and also that he tracked the murder of Soule Ravelle to me; but you are not aware that this man, Chester Argyle Granger, as he was baptized in the old Point Coupee Chapel, betrayed to the tutor that I was the murderer."

"My friend here, Argyle, had become so overwhelmed with debt and sin, that he had taken to the sea as a free rover, and, run down by the Pirate Priest, he, to save his own neck, betrayed me."

"He went free, I went to prison and would have hanged, had I not made my escape."

"He has not been able to keep honest, and I find him here, and to-day his career will end, for I shall string him up to yonder rigging."

Rita and Chester Granger had both listened in silence to the words of Barton Keys, the former seeming little interested, the latter pale and stern.

But at the last words of the pirate captain, Rita started, while Chester Granger, as I must now call the smuggler lieutenant, said earnestly:

"I admit the truth of what you have said, Barton Keys; but you first inveigled me into playing cards, and I went from gambling to worse sins, until I was forced to fly from justice."

"Once I could hold my head up as an honorable man; but now I am an outlaw, and you made me such."

"When captured by Bradford Carr, the Pirate Priest, I did tell him who had slain Soule Ravelle, and I confessed all to save my neck from the gallows."

"I had no claim on you that I should spare you, and be I what I am, I love life too dearly to wish to die at the yard-arm."

"Circumstances have brought me again face to face with you, and I am in your power. I deemed that Bradford Carr had again raised the cross and cutlass flag, and I find that you are impersonating him for some vile purpose of your own."

"Now I have said all that I care to, and you will never hear me beg you for my life."

"I shall hang you within the hour, Chester Granger, and thus pay the debt of revenge I owe you," was the savage reply.

"No, Barto, you will do nothing of the kind," calmly said Rita.

"What do you mean, Rita?" and the face of the pirate flushed with anger.

"Just what I say, Barto—you shall not hang that man."

"Shall not?"

"That is what I said."

"By Heaven, Rita, you must learn that I am master on my own ship!"

"Sh! You are not on your own ship, so don't get excited, for you will only attract the attention of the men."

"I care not, for I—"

"Be calm, Barto, and hear me, for I tell you frankly this man is not under your command, but my father's lieutenant."

"He commands this lugger, which brought me to you, and he is to be treated with the respect the Sea Owl himself would demand."

"If you have a grudge against Senor Granger, for so you call him, wait until you meet on equal terms, some time, and then let the best man win; but now because you have the power with your large schooner, heavy guns, and four-score men, you shall not crush the weak, and especially one who has been my protector and is the Sea Owl's lieutenant."

Barton Keys heard Rita through with no patient humor; but he feared Rita, as I have said, and he simply dared not put her at defiance.

But he wished to get out of his position as gracefully as possible, so said:

"Well, Rita, it is as you say cowardly to take advantage of one in my power; and if Chester Granger will swear to me that he will keep the secret about my not being Bradford Carr, the Pirate Priest, I will allow him to go free."

"You will do this, Senor Granger, will you not?" asked Rita, in her sweet way.

"I will do as you request, lady, but from no fear of that man—your husband," was the response.

"Thank you; and now farewell, and tell my father that you delivered your charge in safety on board the Sea Owl."

Chester Granger raised his hat politely, bowed, and made no reply, while Rita drew Barton Keys toward the gangway.

"We shall meet again, Chester Granger," called out the pirate.

"I hope so, and that it will be upon equal terms, Barton Keys."

"Farewell, Lady Rita, and accept my thanks for saving my worthless life."

Rita waved her hand, and a moment after the boat was pulling back toward the schooner, while the lugger quickly got under way again and went flying away on her course back to the Sea Owl's Nest.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MERCY THROUGH JEALOUSY.

UPON returning on board the schooner, Rita expected a stormy scene with her husband, while he in turn anticipated upbraiding and anger on her part, from his having made the attack upon Brandt Plantation.

But both were agreeably disappointed, for as long as Rita did not upbraid him, when he knew he had deceived her, she was content not to do so, while he kept silent regarding the daring part that she had played, in saving Chester Granger and thus cheating Barton Keys of his revenge.

On the contrary, therefore, both avoided any allusion to the past, and Rita sweetly asked:

"Which way now, Barto?"

"I have suffered in men, need some repairs to my vessel, and stores, so have decided to run up to the city," he answered.

"It will be a most daring undertaking."

"True, but I will manage well, for I shall put the guns in the hold, cover the decks with lumber, as though she was a lumber craft, keep three-fourths of the men below at a time, and in a disguise, such as you can get me up in, I can defy all discovery."

"I hope so; but will you go at once?"

"Yes, for I have a lumber schooner from Maine lying over in the bayou which I came out of when I chased you, and which I captured last night."

"We can disguise the schooner thoroughly."

Sailing for the bayou, Barton Keys set his men to work, and, by the following day the most practiced seaman's eye would never recognize her trim model and warlike look, under the complete metamorphosis which she had undergone, for even her snowy sails had been replaced by old and patched ones, and her needle-like bowsprit given place to a clumsy jibboom.

The seams of the port-holes had been closed up and painted over, and it looked as though she had been loaded deep with a deck-load of lumber, whereas there was but a shell of timber, with space for the men beneath, and in half an hour her crew could have thrown it overboard into the sea.

The men too dressed as honest Kennebec sailors, while Barton Keys was so thoroughly disguised, under the hands of Rita, as to be no more recognizable, than was his wife in her homespun suit, spectacles, and whitened hair, plastered down over her temples, and her knitting, for she kept her hands busy as the disguised schooner lazily went up the river, not one on board the numerous vessels she passed suspecting what lay beneath the homely mask she wore.

Arriving at an anchorage above the city, just at sunset, Barton Keys went ashore, telling Rita he would be gone until after midnight, perhaps.

Hardly had he disappeared, when Rita quickly went into the forward state-room and, after an absence of some minutes returned, but not alone.

In one hand she carried the end of a chain, which she made fast to a ring bolt in the cabin.

And that chain held in durance vile a human being, a man of noble presence in spite of his white, haggard face and sunken eyes, with unkempt hair and a beard of many months' growth half-hiding his manly countenance.

That man was Bradford Carr, who had so long suffered in chains in the power of his bitterest foe.

"Be seated, senor, for you seem weak and I would talk with you," said Rita in a tone of kindness.

Silently the prisoner sunk into an easy-chair, and then Rita said:

"Senor Carr, you have suffered deeply."

"Yes, I have suffered much in mind, but not in body."

"You are in constant dread that harm will befall the lady you love?"

"If you have loved, and fear danger for that loved one, you can well understand what I feel," earnestly answered Bradford Carr.

"And more, you know that my husband—"

"Your husband?" cried the man springing

to his feet in amazement, and making his chains rattle.

"Yes, my husband, Barton Keys."

"Are you married to that man, woman?" hoarsely asked the prisoner.

"Yes."

"In all honesty?"

"I thought that you knew that I was."

"When?"

"Before I sailed with him."

"Where?"

"In the cabin of my father's lugger."

"By whom?"

"Father Homer, the village padre near the Blue Anchor Inn."

"Heaven be praised!" earnestly ejaculated Bradford Carr.

"Why are you so thankful, senor, for my marriage?"

"Because I now know that Barton Keys cannot force Maud to marry him."

"He might do worse, senor, and that is why I have brought you here to talk with you."

"What have you to say, lady?"

"I would ask you, if you were free, if you would marry the Senorita Brandt?"

"Gladly, if she does not believe me all that that vile man has made me out before the world."

"Do not speak ill of my husband, senor, before his wife."

"Pardon me."

"Will you marry her and fly to a scene far from here, where my husband can never track you?"

"Willingly, if she will go with me."

"Then, senor, have hope, for as soon as I have laid my plans, I will free you, and instantly you must be ready to depart with the one you love."

"She shall know all, upon condition that she tells not the secret, and be ready to go with you."

"But why should I fly, lady, from the—from Barton Keys?"

"Because on those conditions alone will I set you free, as I do not intend that you shall ever meet."

"If you remain, my husband will be a bloodhound upon your track, and guard your bride ever so faithfully, you will find her torn from your arms, for Barton Keys is not a man to be thwarted with impunity."

"You pledge me your honor that you will fly with your bride, leaving no trace by which you can be found, and I will arrange for your flight and set you free."

"It may be days, weeks, months before I can keep my promise, but I will keep it in the end."

"I thank you, lady, and I will have hope."

"Now I must lead you back to your prison, but remember, what I do for you is not from disloyalty to my husband, but to save him from a great crime, and to win his love wholly for myself."

So saying Rita led the prisoner back to his state-room, and returning to the cabin, she threw on a shawl and bonnet and ordered a seaman to row her ashore and await there her return.

For more than two hours she was absent, but then returned, and soon after Barton Keys came back to find her sitting by the cabin table reading, and awaiting his coming.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PLOT TO RUIN.

WHEN Colonel Brandt went to New Orleans to live, at least until the dangers of his dwelling in the Plantation Home were over, he rented a furnished house with large and handsome grounds overlooking the river, and in the upper part of the city.

There, in spite of Maud trying to live the life of a recluse, her many friends and admirers found her out, and, after Irving's gallant capture of the smuggler yacht, the family at once became conspicuous marks of attention.

Although mourning for her lover, Maud was compelled to take her place as a belle, which position her beauty and accomplishments won for her, while as an heiress, it was believed, to almost fabulous wealth, she became the star that must guide the destiny of many a fortune-hunter to set in gloom.

There was one great dread Maud had in coming to the city, and that was that her father, a man of the highest sense of honor in all else, was a perfect slave to gambling.

He had, in early life, swamped his own inheritance, and at the death of his wife and father, he had been left by them, for Mrs. Brandt had a fortune in her own right, so bound that he could not squander what was to go to Maud and Irving.

The outside world did not know this, and believed the immense estates of the children to be his, and little dreamed that he had only a few thousand a year, which was ample, with his living, to support him even in indulgences.

Maud's inheritance from Soule Ravelle, to whom she had been engaged, and which was little indeed, had been paid to her father, and by him squandered at the gaming-table.

Then Colonel Brandt had fallen into the power of Barton Keys, and that villain had used the

power to force himself into an engagement with Maud, she promising to marry him to save her father.

The return of Bradford Carr had ended this, and Maud had then pledged herself to him, the poor tutor of her brother, the student for the priesthood, and the only man she had ever loved.

But the disappearance of Bradford Carr, to become, as all rumor had it, in reality a pirate priest, had again brought sorrow upon her young heart, and it was no wonder that she dreaded the temptations of the city upon her father, for by the terms of her mother's and grandfather's will she was not to marry without Colonel Brandt's consent, and this gave a chance for some other gambling adventurer to get a claim upon her hand, through the besetting sin of the gambler planter.

Irving also realized the sin of his father in all its enormity, and watched him closely, well knowing his broken pledges not to gamble, and both he and his sister hoped for the best, yet feared for the worst.

There was one other also who knew the colonel's weakness, and who had made up his mind to protect him for his children's sake.

That, other one was Palafox the Pirate that had been, but changed to the Buccaneer Hunter, for though still believed a sea rover, he was devoting all his energies, laying his snares, and dedicating his life to drive outlaws from the blue waters of the Gulf, and the pretended Pirate Priest was his first game.

Myrtle, the daughter of the Sea Fox, was then a pupil at Madam Chotard's fashionable boarding school, no one dreaming, other than Maud and Irving, that she was the child of a pirate.

An exquisitely beautiful girl, just across the threshold of her teens, she was beloved by her teachers and schoolmates for her many virtues, and withal a woman in mind and heart, she kept the secret of what her father had been well locked up in her own breast.

Often Maud called to take her home with her, and such visits always brought lightness to Irving's heart, for Myrtle seemed the one girl in the world in his eyes.

Thus matters stood about the time that Barton Keys went to New Orleans in disguise, nominally to fit his schooner out, but really to plot against Maud Brandt, whom he had determined to kidnap at the moment it was in his power to do so.

The going thither with him of Rita his wife, was a sad stumbling-block in his way; but he determined to get rid of her in some way, and to better settle upon a plot, he went up to visit a man with whom he had had some financial dealings in other days, and to whom the Sea Owl had recommended him as a safe person to dispose of his piratical booty, and to aid him when he should need it.

That man was Rudolpho, whom the reader has before met.

He found the money-lender in, but was unknown to him in his disguise, so said:

"A few moments with you, senor, with your permission."

"You are a sailor?" assented rather than asked Rudolpho.

"Yes, senor."

"Have we met before?" and Rudolpho eyed his visitor closely, for he was no man to trust himself alone with one he did not know.

"Senor, I come from the Sea Owl," said Barton Keys, wishing no longer delay.

"Ah! enter my private room," and he ushered the visitor into the "curiosity shop," where Rita had her interview with him.

"Now, senor, how is your captain and my old friend?"

"Senor Rudolpho, I am my own master, for though I come to you from the recommendation of the Sea Owl, I come on my own affairs, and you may know me when I tell you that I am the Pirate Priest."

"Ha! by Heaven, but I am glad to meet a man of your caliber; but you are in disguise, doubtless?"

"Naturally, when to be recognized would be to lose my life."

"Well, senor, in what can I serve a man so distinguished?" and Rudolpho gazed upon his visitor with increased interest, for though his dealings were with the lawless, it had not been often that he met a man of the fame of the Pirate Padre.

"In the first place let me tell you that I sent you a cargo of booty some time since."

"Never received it, senor."

"I know that, for it was captured coming over by that young sea imp, Irving Brandt."

"Ah, yes, that was the Sea Owl's yacht, or rather the Brandt boy's, which he recaptured."

"So he had some of your booty on board, Captain Padre?"

"Yes, and I lost it; but I have some treasure left, of which this is a sample," and he took out a small leather case and tossed some jewels on the table before the money-lender.

"They are rich, senor."

"Yes, and I have more, with booty in the hold of my schooner, which now lies in the river."

"You are daring, senor."

"I take my chances, Rudolpho, but guard against discovery."

"Now I want money on these gems?"

"How much, senor?"

"Fifteen thousand."

"As a loan or sale?"

"Buy them from me, for I do not care to redeem them."

"I'll give you that sum for them."

"Do so, and now, for I wish to look in at the Palace of Chance and try my luck."

"Ah, yes," and the money-lender counted out the sum agreed on for the gems and handed it to Barton Keys, who then asked:

"Do you know Colonel Brandt, senor?"

"Yes, if you refer to Rupert Brandt, the rich planter over on Mississippi Sound."

"I do, and I would like to know if he is in the city?"

"Yes, he has rented the old Suzette mansion on the river, just above the city, and lives there with his daughter."

"And his son?"

"Spends most of his time on his lugger yacht, I think."

"Where is the craft?"

"Anchored out in the lake."

"Ah, yes; but can you tell me if the colonel gambles now?"

"I believe not."

"And has Miss Brandt many suitors?"

"Scores."

"Thank you; the Suzette mansion you said?"

"Yes."

"I know it," and with this Barton Keys departed and walked rapidly down the street to a more fashionable part of the city, where he halted in front of a brilliantly-lighted entrance to a grand stairway.

As he stopped he saw a person about to move away, and he fairly started as his eyes fell upon him, while he muttered between his set teeth:

"Colonel Brandt, by all that's holy."

Then aloud he called out:

"Pardon me, sir, but I'm a stranger in town, a sea captain from up the Atlantic shore, and being in funds, and often lucky, I was looking for the Palace of Chance to try my fortune."

"Would you be good enough to direct me, sir?"

The one he addressed was a handsome man across the line of fifty, with gray hair and mustache, and a military carriage.

Seeing a respectable old gentleman, as he believed the man to be, he turned politely, and answered:

"I was just hesitating, sir, whether to go up or not, for it is one of my sins to gamble; but, as you are a stranger I will gain you admission, for one must be known to enter the Chance Palace."

"My name is Brandt, sir, Rupert Brandt, and yours—"

"Captain Argyll, sir, and I am glad to know you, and thank you for your kindness."

With this the two ascended the brightly-lighted stairs, and a man, who stood in the shadow of a tree across the street, and seemed to be watching, crossed over and also entered the Palace of Chance.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE PALACE OF CHANCE.

AT the time of which I write the "Palace of Chance" was the aristocratic and most fashionable "gambling hell" of the Crescent City, which was then largely made up of Spanish and French families, with a sprinkling of planter society, and a large number of shipping merchants and sea-faring men, the latter giving to the town a rather wild and lawless character among those in the lower walks of life.

French cafes, Spanish drinking-saloons, and sailors' inns made the river quarter a place to be dreaded, for there was a large commerce between the city and foreign and home ports, and many vessels were coming and going daily.

Then there were fleets of flatboats coming down the grand Mississippi from the upper country and streams, and their crews were a wild, reckless set, while no one denied that there was known to be a lawless element, composed of pirates and smugglers, also to be found in the city.

Thus with the extravagant and fast young planters among the "upper crust," and the make up of the lower strata, it must be seen that New Orleans was a very gay city to dwell in, and a miniature world in itself.

The Palace of Chance, as I have said was the gambling resort of the wealthy, those men, planters and merchants, who could risk thousands upon the turn of a card.

The rooms were gorgeously fitted up, and consisted of one grand *salon* and several smaller apartments connecting with it, in all of which card-playing and other games of chance were indulged in to the heart's content, or purse's depth rather of those who went there.

It was into this place that Colonel Brandt led his newly formed acquaintance, who had professed to be a stranger where he had sunk a fortune at cards.

The colonel cast a hasty glance at his com-

panion, to see if he was one he would dare be seen with under the full glare of the lamps, and seemed satisfied, for Barton Keys had made himself up, or rather Rita had as a most respectable looking old man, and one who was able to lose a few dollars too and not whine about it.

The colonel was well known, and the door-keeper passed him with a nod of recognition, saying simply as he glanced at Barton Keys:

"Your friend, colonel?"

"Yes, Duluth," and the two passed into the grand salon, where already there was quite a large crowd, all more or less gambling.

"What game will you play, Captain Argyle?" asked the colonel, as they passed from table to table, many of the players greeting the planter cordially, and then glancing at his companion to see who it was he had in tow.

"Oh, any game, sir; but I rather prefer a little hand at cards, if you feel so inclined?"

Colonel Brandt hesitated, his face flushed and paled, and then he said:

"I had about given up gambling, sir; but I will not disappoint you, as you are a stranger here, so we will secure a table and enjoy a little game to ourselves."

The table was found, off in one corner, for the planter seemed to wish to avoid notice as much as possible, and an attendant brought cards, brandy and wine, when the two sat down to play.

"What now, colonel? I have heard you called here by that title, though you were too modest to name your rank to me?" asked the disguised pirate.

"My title, sir, is one of the past; but name your own sum."

"Call it five hundred as a starter."

"You begin large, sir, but I am willing," and the game began, and the colonel was the winner.

Then another followed, and again the colonel won.

The third the stakes were increased, at Colonel Brandt's suggestion to one thousand dollars, and Barton Keys won.

"We are where we started from," said the planter.

"Yes," and the next game the colonel raked over the winnings.

And thus it went on until the colonel had a large sum to his credit; and then lost it all upon one game.

Then the luck of Barton Keys seemed in the ascendant, and he was a steady winner until the planter said he was forced to borrow from the keeper of the salon.

"No, my dear sir, for I will cash your I. O. U's," said Barton Keys, thus luring his victim on.

The colonel bowed his thanks, and said, pleasantly:

"My credit is good here, sir, for any sum, as you can find out by inquiry, my being a stranger to you."

"Oh, no, my dear colonel, your face is sufficient guarantee."

The planter then called for pen, ink and paper, and wrote an I. O. U. for five thousand dollars.

This the pirate won.

Then another was written, and again won by the pirate.

A third the planter won, and believing that his luck had changed, he accepted the offer of the pirate to place a large sum on the next game.

"How large shall it be, sir?" asked the colonel, a trifle anxiously.

"Say fifty thousand, sir?"

The planter started, and answered:

"I already am indebted to you quite a large sum, so we'll make it twenty-five thousand, if it please you."

"As you please, colonel, and I am afraid the chances are in your favor."

"I believe so, as my luck changed with the last game."

"Then suppose we call all due, and the bet on our next game an even fifty, making an I. O. U. for that amount?"

The planter nodded, made out the paper, tore the others up, and then said:

"Now let us go on with the game, captain."

"All right, colonel," and the game progressed; one of the persons present in the room strolling into the out-of-the-way corner and looking on.

But neither noticed his presence, until the game was ended, when the pirate said:

"You have lost, colonel; but, better luck next time."

Colonel Brandt sat like one in a trance.

He knew that he did not have two thousand dollars to call his own, and yet he had given his note at three days for fifty thousand dollars.

He had given his pledge to his children not to gamble, but they could not help him even if they wished to, so had he drawn in the past upon their resources.

"No, no, I dare not play again. I am in bad luck to-night," murmured the unhappy man, and his lips quivered.

"As monsieur seems to wish to play more,

and his opponent is in bad luck, permit me to take his hand?"

Both men looked up, and beheld the one who had drawn near to watch their game.

Colonel Brandt instantly said:

"With pleasure, sir," for he caught at a chance to collect his nerve, hoping for a change of luck in his favor, should he try again, which he felt that he must do, for owing fifty thousand with no money to pay it, he felt that he might win it back, even if he involved himself deeper, which would make little difference to him then.

The pirate paused, and asked abruptly:

"Do you wish to relinquish your hand to this man?"

"Pardon, monsieur, I am a gentleman," said the stranger, and both the pirate and the planter seemed to realize that fact, as they regarded him more attentively.

He was a man of medium size, well formed, dressed in a clerical kind of way, and looked little like one to frequent a gambling hell.

His face was clean shaven, and every feature wore the stamp of one above his fellow-men in intellect and character.

He might have passed for a clergyman, and he might fill the place of a statesman; but what his calling was there was nothing in his black suit and general appearance to indicate.

"Well, sir, I am satisfied to accept you as a partner, if Colonel Brandt is willing to relinquish his hand for a short rest," said the pirate with some show of politeness.

"I am more than willing, sir," said the colonel, rising.

The stranger bowed, drew up a chair for the colonel, and took the chair just vacated.

"What sum, sir?" coolly asked the pirate.

"Fifty thousand, if it please you, monsieur," was the unmoved response of the stranger.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRANGER WHO PLAYED A BOLD GAME.

To do him full credit, Barton Keys was no coward, either physically or mentally.

He was willing to meet a foe a little over half-way at all times, and, a man of great strength, he feared not to face any one.

In gambling he was a bold, reckless player, but not an honest one.

He had made certain little devices, for getting the best of a partner, a study, and had so reduced his tricks to a science, that he could cheat even a card-sharp.

In his games he took the chances of his opponent getting up the winner, by allowing him to beat a number of times, when it was in his power to prevent it.

Thus, in all of his gambling career no one had ever suspected him of playing an unfair game.

He saw what was in the mind of Colonel Brandt, and he knew, if he could detain him in the salon he would play again, and he was anxious to involve him as deeply as possible.

To do this he was willing to play with the stranger, when at another time he would have taken the intrusion as an impertinence.

When the stranger so calmly mentioned the enormous sum for which he was willing to play, Barton Keys started, and was momentarily thrown off his guard.

"Who is this fellow, I wonder?" he asked himself, through his shut teeth. "Well, I'll gratify him, and play my little trick to win," he added, and then said aloud:

"Very well, monsieur, let fifty thousand be the stake, then!"

The stranger bowed, and the cards were shuffled, while Colonel Brandt stood by, breathing hard, and showing more excitement than he had in his own game.

Taking up his cards the stranger glanced at them, and then turned his piercing eyes full upon the hands of his opponent.

Barton Keys observed this, and for the first time in his life he grew nervous, for there seemed to be something fascinating in those dark eyes, not observing his own cards, not looking him in the face, but bending their gaze directly upon his hands.

Nettled, he said:

"I suppose you have the fifty thousand with you, monsieur?"

The stranger did not remove his eyes from the hands before them, but taking from his breast pocket a wallet he placed it upon the table, replying quickly:

"Will you kindly count the contents, monsieur?"

Barton Keys turned down his cards, and was about to stretch forth his hand to grasp the wallet, when the stranger said:

"I asked this gentleman, sir, not you."

The planter then took up the wallet and glanced into it, while he said:

"You need have no fear, Captain Argyle, for there is over that sum here, as I can see at a glance, large as is the amount."

Barton Keys bowed and again took up his cards, expecting the stranger to ask him to put up his money.

But the colonel's note lay on the table, with the pile of money put up by him and the pirate, and the stranger said nothing, other than:

"I am ready, monsieur," and he led with a card.

Barton Keys saw his chance right there to play his little trick, and put down a card that did not belong to the pack, for marked as they were, he already knew just what a hand his adversary had.

But those burning eyes were upon his hands and he could not crook a finger, so had to play an indifferent following, and the stranger took them up.

Again he played, and again Barton Keys dared not move a finger.

A third play was made, the stranger not seeming to see his cards, only those nimble fingers before him.

Thus it went on until the game was ended, Barton Keys getting white in the face and black-browed.

"The game is mine, sir," said the stranger.

"Yes; will you play again?" bitted the pirate, hoping now to command his nerve and get a chance to play his sharp game.

"First let monsieur pay his indebtedness to me."

"Ah, yes! but let me see, I believe I have only about fifteen thousand with me, excepting a couple more in cash, won from the colonel here."

"I will have to give you my I. O. U. until to-morrow."

"I will not take it, sir," was the cool response.

"Do you mean to say that it is worthless, sir?" angrily retorted the pirate.

"You are an utter stranger to me, sir, and I wish my money, or security."

"I cannot give you but seventeen thousand, sir, but if you will accompany me to my vessel, at anchor in the river, I will pay you all."

"No, sir; I place myself in no trap, for many a man has lost his life for a far less sum," and the words were uttered with the utmost calmness.

Barton Keys was now white with passion, and seemed about to spring upon his insulter, while Colonel Brandt looked on with amazement.

As though he expected an attack, the stranger said:

"As monsieur has offered me his note, I will just take this one instead, and that cancels the debt this gentleman owes you."

He quickly took up the note of Colonel Brandt as he spoke, and placing it in his wallet, thrust the latter into his pocket, while Barton Keys cried:

"By Heaven, sir stranger, but this is a high-handed act that I will not allow."

"Monsieur, are you not willing that I should hold your note?" and the stranger bent his gaze upon the colonel.

What the planter saw in his face he could not tell, but it seemed to him that there was hope there for him, and he answered promptly:

"Assuredly, sir, and it cancels my indebtedness to Captain Argyle and places me in obligation for the amount to you."

"Never! I will expose you both as having connived to—"

"Sit down, sir!" thundered the stranger, and then he continued in a hoarse voice, and speaking rapidly:

"I know you, sir, and I am a Government officer, so accept the situation and go before it is too late."

Barton Keys fairly reeled under the shock, but springing to his feet, he was turning away without his money, when the stranger said:

"Hold, sir, for here is your money; but, monsieur, how much of this cash did you lose," and he turned to the planter, who answered:

"Just two thousand, sir."

"Here it is, and this is yours," and he thrust the bills into the hand of the pirate, while he continued, addressing the planter:

"Do not hesitate to take your own, sir, for this man cheated you, as I saw, and I give him just two minutes to leave this salon, or go to the *carcel* with me."

"Which shall it be, monsieur?"

Barton Keys showed very quickly which was his choice, for he walked off with an alacrity that showed he was fully acquainted with his peril.

As he disappeared from the salon, Colonel Brandt said warmly:

"My dear sir, you are a stranger to me; but you certainly have greatly befriended me."

"Permit me to do so still more, Colonel Brandt, by tearing up this note," and the paper was instantly destroyed.

The planter was deeply moved at this, and essayed to speak, but the choking in his throat prevented utterance for a minute or more.

Then he said in a voice that quivered:

"Who are you, sir, for I am sure we never met before?"

"I am one, Colonel Brandt, who has the interest of yourself and family at heart, and I shall be constantly on the watch that you do not gamble away your honor."

"Nay, sir, you need say nothing in response, for you have no defense, only keep away from this gambling-hell, for the sake of those you love, and let me tell you confidentially, there

are those watching you that will report to your children when you break your pledge after this night."

The stranger's manner was kindness, and Colonel Brandt could not resent it, so cried earnestly:

"In God's name, sir, who are you?"

"One who has just saved the honor of Colonel Rupert Brandt, who had nothing to pay his note with, which was held by a designing villain and black leg gambler."

"And you know that man as such, while I deemed him an honest sea-captain?"

"Who he is I do not know, only I felt that he was crooked, and perhaps a criminal, and so I tried him with the accusation, and the alacrity he displayed in clearing out leads me to believe that he is even worse than I believed him to be."

"Now, sir, let us leave this place together, and we will see if our late acquaintance is watching for us."

But Barton Keys was thoroughly alarmed, and hastened off to his vessel, before his late antagonist could follow on his track and discover where he went, and the planter parted from his new-found friend at his own gate, for he insisted upon escorting him thus far, but without being able to discover who he was, more than that he was one who had served him most nobly.

CHAPTER XXX.

IRVING BRANDT RECEIVES VISITORS.

OUT in Lake Borgne, four miles from the city of New Orleans, lay a beautiful craft at anchor, the day following the night scene in the Palace of Chance.

Here and there were larger vessels anchored near, and then a few smaller ones, such as coasters and fishing smacks; but the center of attraction in the little fleet was the one above referred to and which, though a lugger in build, was a yacht in reality.

Her hull was made for speed and stanchness in a heavy seaway combined, and her spars seemed long enough for a vessel of twice her tonnage.

Everything about her was as ship-shape as though she were a vessel-of-war, and that she was able to protect herself against an ordinary foe was shown by the fact that she carried three guns, a pivot twelve-pounder forward, and two sixes aft.

But her crew told that she was not an American cruiser, for they were negroes, half a score in number, and dressed in the white jeans, jacket and pants, worn by slaves in the olden time, and which made no mean uniform.

Suddenly a vehicle drove up to the beach, and two persons alighted therefrom.

The first was a gentleman, the same whom the reader met the night before in the Palace of Chance as the friend of Colonel Brandt.

The second was a young girl, with large liquid blue eyes, a wealth of red-gold hair, and a form whose every motion was grace.

Calling a fisherman, the gentleman tossed him a piece of gold and asked him to set them on board the lugger.

The man was delighted, polished up his boat as well as he could, and quickly obeyed, the vehicle waiting on the beach for their return.

Seeing the destination of the boat, a negro pacing the deck, and who evidently acted in the capacity of mate, at once descended into the cabin.

There, at a table writing, sat a youth, tall, superbly-formed for his age, which was scarcely over seventeen, and with a face that was fearless, proud and handsome.

He wore a suit of white duck, with brass buttons, and upon the table lay a broad-brimmed Panama hat, encircled by a silver cord.

The cabin was very roomy for a vessel of the yacht's size, furnished elegantly, and fitted up with every luxury a sailor's heart could wish, while forward were several state-rooms upon either side, with a gangway leading to a dining-salon amidships.

"Massa Irving, dere is a boat comin' off ter de yacht, sah, an' dere am a gemman an' la ty in it, sah," said the negro, as he descended the companionway.

"Is it not my father and sister, Wood?" asked the youth, putting away his writing materials.

"No sah, an' I doesn't know dem at all."

"All right, Wood, I will come on deck at once," and Irving Brandt, the handsome boy planter and yachtsman, at once ascended to the deck.

As his eyes fell upon his visitors, now on board, and advancing toward the cabin, his face flushed with pleasure, while he cried, as he extended a hand to both:

"Captain, this is kind in you to come and see me, and to bring Myrtle too."

"I visited her at her school this morning, Master Irving, and told her I was coming, and at once urged her to come, and you know my weakness to let Myrtle govern me."

"Yes, Irving, I did wish to come and see you, I will frankly admit, and your lugger too, which I have heard you have made into such a beautiful yacht, and certainly you have," answered the young girl, frankly.

"You shall have a look at the new Lady Maud, Myrtle, before you go; but now come

into the cabin, and Leonard will give us some lunch, for this lake air will make you hungry, and it keeps me in that state all the time," and Irving Brandt ushered his guests into the cabin.

"Well, Captain Palafox, I am really glad to see you, and I hope you have more news for me," said the youth, as soon as his guests were seated.

"I am on the track of news, Master Irving, and hope that it will come out as I think; but I wished to tell you something in confidence."

"Well, captain?"

"You must keep a close watch upon your father, for he is led into temptation to gamble, and cannot resist it, any more than the drunkard can refrain from liquor."

"But he pledged his word to both Sis Maud and myself that he would never again touch a card," said Irving in alarm.

"And he meant to keep his pledge, but was unable to do so."

"Ah, captain! has he again involved himself in gambling?"

"He is now all right, Irving; but only last night he met a man who made a victim of him."

"Who that man was I do not know, any more than does your father; but he was a villain and inveigled the colonel into a game."

"I was passing the Palace of Chance, when I saw your father hesitate before the door."

"He wanted to go up, and tried hard to resist, at last turning away."

"As he did so a stranger advanced, addressed him, and asking him about the place, the two went up together."

"I followed, and then I saw that the man meant your father as a victim."

"Watching them from my position near, I discerned the fellow deliberately cheating the colonel, and, by his trickery win from him fifty thousand in money, and for which your father gave him I. O. U. for three days."

"Captain Palafox, my father has ruined himself, for, rich as he seems to be, he has nothing, and Maud's inheritance and mine are so locked up, that we cannot get the money to save him," and Irving spoke with a soberness that showed how fully he realized the enormity of his father's act.

"As for that, Irving, don't worry, for I arranged that all right."

"You?"

"Yes, I played one game with the man, made it for the fifty thousand, and, up to the fellow's tricks, I won, and he not having the money, I took your father's due-bill to him, and—"

"Ah, captain! you shall be paid back, if you will only give me time."

"My dear boy, there is nothing to pay, for I told your father he had been cheated, tore up the note, and walked up to his home with him, telling him that he was closely watched, so that it would have some influence with him to prevent his playing; but I tell you this in confidence, and I wish you to keep your eye on him, and in a quiet way let him know that both you and your sister are watching him."

"It will pain sis as much to hear this of father, as it will gladden her heart to know what you have done."

"But you must not tell her, for it would do no good, only give her another sorrow to bear; but let your father, in some way, believe that you are both watching him."

"That I will do; but, Captain Palafox, how am I to repay the debts of gratitude that we all owe you?"

"As for that, Irving, you paid in advance by saving the lives of Myrtle and myself."

"But have you seen anything, or heard anything suspicious of late?"

"I just returned from the plantation, and I recaptured while there the smuggler who proved traitor to the Sea Owl's daughter."

"He was making his way back to the rendezvous and formed a compact with me to betray the Sea Owl and his band, and I shall await his coming."

"You think he will not fail you?"

"No, for it is to his interest to do so."

"You know any number of my crew are at your service."

"Thank you, sir, and if your vessel is near, I will call upon you to aid me."

"Oh! no, take the whole honor yourself, and what men you need; but if I am not here, go to the naval quarters and get a crew."

"I will; but where is your vessel?"

"In the river in front of the city, and even Myrtle here would not know her in her present disguise."

After a pleasant chat of an hour longer, and lunch together, the Sea Fox and his daughter took their leave, Irving Brandt returning to the city with them to have a talk with his father, and also to acquaint the commandant of the naval quarters that he might have to ask a complement of men from him at an early day.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ANOTHER ACT IN THE DRAMA OF REVENGE.

WHEN Rita left the vessel, it was with the intention of following her husband, and she went directly to the house of Rudolpho, the money-lender.

As she neared it she saw her husband come out, and following him, beheld him go to the Palace of Chance.

Confident that he would remain there to gamble, for he had told her of his besetting sin, she returned to Rudolpho's.

In her disguise as an elderly lady, Rudolpho did not recognize in her the brilliant woman who had engaged him to purchase the lugger for her.

"How can I serve you, senora?" he asked, as she entered.

"Do you do detective work for good pay?" she asked bluntly.

"Yes, senora; I have men who do, and they are faithful spies."

"Suppose the one I set you to track is your friend?"

"If I am well paid, my spy work is outside of my friendship, senora; but who sent you to me, may I ask, for I always need a guarantee?"

"The Sea Owl."

"I could ask for no better recommendation; so tell me the work you wish done."

"Are you acquainted with a man who left here half an hour ago?"

"A number come and go all the time, senora."

"This one was a tall, well-formed man, dressed as a seaman, and with grayish hair and beard."

"Yes, there was such a man."

"Do you know him?"

"I do."

"Will you give me his name?"

"No."

"Will you prove that you know him as I do?"

"First tell me what you know of him?"

"I know this much, that he is one whose every action in this city I wish made known to me."

"I mean him no harm, I pledge you, but I wish to know just where he goes and what he does while here."

"That can be discovered, senora, for gold."

"Will this repay you?" and Rita tossed a bag of gold upon the table before the man.

"Amplly, senora, and you shall have the services of my best spy for it."

"But where shall he report to you?"

"Here, for I shall come here," was the answer, and Rita departed and again returned to the schooner, where some time after, the reader will remember, Barton Keys joined her, little dreaming that she had been absent from the vessel.

The following morning Barton Keys said:

"Rita, I wish you would alter my disguise some, for I do not care to be seen as the old sea captain I impersonated last night."

"Did you get into any trouble?" asked Rita anxiously.

"No, but I met one who seemed to know me, and I wish to sail under other colors to-day."

"Very well, I will make you up as a black-whiskered Spanish merchant, with spectacles and cane."

"The very thing," and while Barton Keys began to prepare for his change of toilet, Rita said she would go to the booty-room and select just what he needed.

Gliding forward she called to a negro steward, and said:

"Monk, you know the city well?"

"Yes, missus."

"Do you know the shop of Rudolpho the money-lender?"

"Yes, missus, I knows him, for I hes took t'ings dar fer yer fader."

"Yes, I remember; now I'll give you leave to go ashore this morning, and this piece of gold to spend; but first take a note to Rudolpho and give it to him in person."

"If he asks you any questions, refuse to answer."

"Yes, missus, I do as yer tells me."

Then Rita stepped into the "booty-room," as the state-room was called where the treasure was kept, and hastily wrote a few lines, which she sealed up and handed to the negro, who seemed glad of the chance to get ashore.

A few moments she reappeared in the cabin with her arms full of clothing and other things that went to make up her husband's disguise.

In an hour's time, completely metamorphosed, Barton Keys left the schooner and wended his way up-town.

After looking in at various places he sought Rudolpho's.

"Well, senor, how are you this morning?" he said with a smile, anxious to test his disguise before the sharp eyes of the money-lender.

"Quite well, thank you, Senor Padre," was the cool reply.

Barton Keys started at this prompt recognition of him.

If the money-lender so readily knew him, others might penetrate his disguise, in a place where he knew so many persons.

"In God's name how did you recognize me, senor?" he asked in alarm.

"Don't get nervous, padre, about your disguise, for it is perfect; but tell me if you know of any one who is on your track?"

"No, and yes, for a man who won a cool

fifty thousand from me last night, said that he knew me."

"Why did you not silence him?"

"It was not convenient then."

"Then you should have dogged his steps and driven a knife into his back."

"I should have done so, but I did not, and who he is I do not know."

"You can think of no one else?"

"No."

"What woman has come to hunt you down?"

"Ah! if that is it, I might say a score," was the answer, with a heartless laugh.

"Well, one is on your track."

"How does she know me?"

"She knew you as you were disguised last night."

"Hah! can that be?"

"It is true, senor."

"Then this disguise will throw her off the scent."

"Hardly," and Rudolpho smiled.

"But how do you know this?"

"She came to me last night, and paid me handsomely to put a spy upon your track."

"A woman did this?"

"Yes, senor."

"And you refused?"

"Oh, no, I accepted."

"What do you mean, Senor Rudolpho?"

"Of course I took her money, and told her I would do so, and so I tell you of it to-day."

"I thank you, and I will pay you handsomely to discover who she is."

"How much is it worth to you, senor, to know?"

"Well, there is a starter, for a spy to find her out," and Barton Keys threw a roll of bills down before the man.

"You are very kind, senor, and I will give you the information," said Rudolpho, as he pocketed the bills.

"You will find out soon?"

"I know."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"And did not tell me?"

"Well, senor, I must earn some money, you know."

"But who is she?"

"Do you recognize this writing?"

"Great God! where did you get this, Rudolpho?"

"A negro brought the note to me an hour or so ago."

"It is my—yes, I know the writing, Rudolpho, and I will pay you well if you at once make known to me when the writer calls again."

"I will see that she is watched, Senor Padre; but have you any more jewels to sell like those last night?"

"I will have before I leave the city," and then Barton Keys left the shop, muttering:

"I must be careful, for Rita is no woman to defy, as her putting a spy on my track proves."

"But she is in the way, and I must send her back to her father, if she will go; if not, I must get rid of her in some way, for I will not be thwarted in my plot to get possession of Maud Brandt, and make her my wife in the very presence of Bradford Carr."

"That will be my sweetest revenge."

"But, first to get rid of Rita, who must go to her father, for I do not wish to kill her; but if she will not, why then *she shall die!*" and the pirate's face grew black with passion as he uttered the terrible threat against the one being in the whole world that loved him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RITA'S SCHEME.

It was several days after the interview between Rudolpho and the pirate captain, that Rita called again at the shop of the former.

She had twice written a note, sending it by the negro steward, Monk, to ask if any discovery had been made regarding the movements of her husband, and in response, Rudolpho had communicated the fact that he had gone to this place, and that he had been seen gambling heavily in the Palace of Chance, and had also been observed to go out to the lake-shore twice, and hold communication with some fishermen there.

But upon this latter point, Rudolpho asserted, his spy was not thoroughly posted, but would inform him as soon as he discovered the slightest trace of anything really suspicious, and that notice should be ready for her when she called, or sent a messenger for it.

As for Barton Keys himself, Rita knew that he passed very little time on board the vessel, and she was left alone all day and the greater part of the night.

When asked by her where he had been, and what doing, his invariable answer was, that he was looking up additional men and attending to getting stores, ammunition, and the necessary sails and spars for the schooner.

He also stated he was looking over the sailing lists, and lists of vessels due, to discover what ones were most valuable to him to look after as prizes.

With all this, Rita pretended to be satisfied, but she was not.

She loved the man, bad as he was, with an idolatrous passion; and she dreaded that Maud Brandt would win him from her.

Well she knew that Maud was innocent in the matter, in fact, a victim; but still if he managed to kidnap her, as she feared he did, then she felt that she would be cast aside.

If cast aside, she knew her nature well enough to know that she would be revengeful against the man she loved, and to prevent this, to keep him all for herself, she determined to place Maud out of his reach.

To do this she must free Bradford Carr, and the two must go together to seek safety far from the power of Barton Keys.

With Rudolpho to serve her for gold, she believed that she could accomplish her ends, for she had it in her power to free the prisoner any night, and, as soon as she was convinced that her husband meant to kidnap Maud, she would act.

She had laid her plan to have a barge ready, with oarsmen engaged to bear the prisoner and Maud up the Mississippi river, from whence they could make their way from town to town and thus reach a far northern city.

She had only to discover that her husband was false, when she would at once work out her plans.

Having decided, she started for the money-lender's, determined to get him to select the barge, have it thoroughly fitted up, and engage a half-score of oarsmen and mate, in fact a crew that could protect themselves against Indians or white robbers in ascending the river, for those were days of dangerous navigation upon the Mississippi.

Arriving at Rudolpho's and at once recognized, she was at once ushered into that wily rascal's curiosity-shop, or private office.

"Any news, senor?" she asked.

"Well, senora, my spy is on the track of news that points to suspicious developments."

"Indeed, and what are they?"

"You shall know by to-morrow, senora, if you will call in the afternoon."

"I will be here, senor; but I have a commission for you to perform."

"I am at your service, senora."

"I believe there are river barges that can be purchased?"

"Yes, senora."

"I want one."

"For freight?"

"No, for passengers."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I want one bought and fitted up in the best manner, with a comfortable cabin with room for two or more, quarters for a couple of servants and a crew of twelve."

"It must be thoroughly stored with the best of provisions, and also carry a supply of tents and equipments for camping on the river bank."

"In fact, I wish a thoroughly-equipped barge."

"For a long distance, senora?"

"Yes, to go as far as the upper towns on the river."

"It will be a long and hard journey for the boatmen, senora?"

"I am aware of that, but the sails will help them a great deal, when the wind is fair, and they shall be paid well for their work."

"Will you go, senora?"

"No, but two friends of mine, and I wish you to get the barge in readiness at once, and if it is not needed, you will yet have your pay."

"And more, senor, I desire the services of a holy father."

"A priest, senor?"

"Yes, I wish him to hold himself in readiness for his services may be needed at any moment after you have the barge in readiness."

"To bury the dead, senora?"

"No, to perform the marriage rite, and I will give you ample compensation, to hand him for the worry he is put to."

"I know a most deserving priest, senora, and will see him; but have you further orders?"

"None, other than to have you tell me how much money you need to carry out my plans thoroughly."

"Considerable, senora."

"How much?"

"The barge will cost a thousand, and perhaps more."

"Then the fitting of it up, and the stores will be as much more, while the tents and wages of the men will be something in the neighborhood of two thousand additional."

"Then there is the priest, and my fees, and the latter I promise you shall be small."

"Doubtless," said Rita dryly, and then she said:

"Here are five thousand dollars, and the man may have the barge to sell besides for himself."

"You are generous, senora, and I will serve you well."

"Do so, and if all goes off as I wish I will give you your fee separate."

"Remember to come to-morrow afternoon, senora," called out Rudolpho as Rita departed.

"I will not forget, senor," was the answer, and the woman walked away, muttering to herself:

"Now to see this beautiful lady who has turned the heart and brain of the one man I love."

"But I will not tell the secret to her until the last moment, though I must see her and talk with her," and the jealous woman took the avenue leading to the home of Colonel Brandt.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAUD'S MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

ONE who saw Maud Brandt, and knew her in all her loneliness of character, would not wonder that she held the place as the Queen of her set in New Orleans a city then, as now famous for beautiful, accomplished and brilliant women.

Her sorrows had first added a tinge of sadness to her face that was by many considered to brighten her beauty, and, if at times she was a little bitter, it was only momentarily, and she was quick to heal a wound she thus had made.

The grounds about the mansion were her favorite resort, rather than the house, and she was wont to sit for hours in a beautiful summer arbor that overlooked the river.

Then she would be often seen in the saddle, or rowing on the river, or walking, and many a poor person knew that when they saw her they would receive a kindly word from her, if not a silver souvenir to aid them in their poverty.

After dinner one afternoon she strolled out to her arbor, a book in hand, and took a seat upon the rustic bench.

The view before her was grand, taking in the majestic river rolling along above and below the city, which lay half a mile from the mansion.

Many vessels dotted the waters, from small fishing-boats to stately ships, and some of them were very beautiful in build and rig.

The busy scene on the levee met her eyes, where men were hard at work loading and unloading vessels, and the hum of the stirring town reached her ears.

Spire here and there arose above the house-tops, a handsome house was visible along the banks on either shore, and altogether the scene was one to rivet the eyes of one who loved nature and man's work so delightfully, blended together.

But Maud Brandt did not read the book she had brought with her.

She had opened it to a certain page, and her eyes had wandered upon the scene spread out before her, yet seeing, she hardly seemed to see, for her thoughts were far away.

Suddenly she looked up and beheld a person coming toward her.

It was one she had not seen before, a woman, plain in dress, with white hair, spectacles, and a dark face.

"My good woman are you looking for me?" asked Maud kindly, as she saw that she came from the mansion, and had doubtless been sent by some of the servants, for she never allowed them to refuse her to a poor person.

"If you are the Lady Maud, I am looking for you, senorita," was the answer.

"I am Maud Brandt, whom some call Lady Maud through kindness," answered the maiden kindly.

"Yes, you can be no other, for no one else can be so beautiful," returned the woman, speaking as though to herself, rather than to the maiden.

"Thank you for your pretty compliment, madam, and if you wish to see me, sit there, for you are tired, I fear."

"My heart is tired, Lady Maud, not my body, for I have a sorrow there that is hard to carry; but I came to seek you, lady, that I might have a talk with you."

"No, I do not need alms, I have money, and plenty, but I do wish to have you answer me a few questions."

"Anything that I can answer you I will, my good woman."

"I thank you, Lady Maud, and I will not detain you long."

"Well, what is it that you would know?"

"You must forgive me, lady, if I cause you pain, and intrude upon that which you wish to lock up in your own loving heart; but my motive is to serve you well, and, in serving you, to serve myself, so you see that I am not wholly unselfish."

Maud was struck with the words and manner of the woman.

They were unlike what she had expected from one of her appearance.

She was interested in the woman in spite of herself, and replied:

"Well, I am ready to hear all that you have to say."

"And will not be angry?"

"No."

"Then, lady, let me ask you if ever you loved more than one man?"

Maud's face flushed, almost angrily, and the woman seeing it said quickly:

"Remember your promise not to be angry, lady."

"This is a strange question, good woman."

"It will lead to others of importance, so please answer me."

"I will answer you frankly, that I never loved but one person, in the way that you doubtless mean, that is, one whom I would be willing to live with through life as a loving wife."

"Thank you, lady; but you have been three times engaged?"

"I have been three times pledged."

"Once to Mr. Soule Ravelle?"

"Yes."

"Again to Mr. Barton Keys?"

"Yes."

"And last to Mr. Bradford Carr?"

"Yes," and Maud's lips quivered.

"Which was the one you loved, lady?"

There was that in the woman's tone that Maud could not refuse to answer her, and she said:

"The last."

"And the others?"

"I respected Mr. Ravelle, and I—hated Mr. Keys."

"Hated him? Thank God!"

Maud fairly started at the woman's earnestness, and then said:

"Now I have answered your questions, tell me why have you asked them?"

"You hate Barton Keys?"

"Yes, hate, detest, loathe, and have an utter contempt for him."

"Yet you were engaged to him?"

"True, as I was engaged to Mr. Ravelle, for neither engagement was of my making, as I entered into the compact simply to please my father."

"And I am glad, oh so glad to hear this, Lady Maud, from your lips; but now tell me, do you believe that Mr. Bradford Carr is the guilty one that people say?"

Maud's eyes flashed as she replied:

"I do not."

"You have been told so, appearances are against him, you have almost seen that he is the Pirate Priest, and yet do not believe it?"

"I do not, nor will I, until he tells me so with his own lips."

"You are true to your love, Lady Maud."

"Yes, and to myself."

"And, Lady Maud, if it were proven that Bradford Carr is not the Pirate Priest, would you marry him?"

"Gladly, if he so wished it, and try to make him forget the sorrows he has known."

"And, lady, if it is proven—if you meet him face to face, and he tells you that he is true to you, to his honor, and not guilty, and begs you to become his wife then and there, and fly with him beyond the persecutions of your foes, to fly with him for your lives, would you go?"

"Yes; but who are you, my good woman, and what do all these questions mean?"

"Wait."

"Do you know that Bradford Carr is true, and is he alive?"

"He is."

"And sent you to me?"

"No. But you must wait, and hold yourself in readiness for a strange sequel to all that has passed."

"I have told you all that I can, Lady Maud, only watch, hope, and be ready to go with him whom you so dearly love, to a spot where your foes can never find you."

"Your hand, please, Lady Maud," and the woman grasped the little hand, and, before Maud was aware of what she was doing, slipped upon her finger a ring.

Then she quickly turned and walked away, while Maud, half dazed at the act, stood gazing after her.

Then her eyes fell upon the ring, and she dropped upon her knees, and cried:

"Holy Mother! it is the ring that I gave to Bradford Carr!"

Springing to her feet, she started in search of the woman, but she had not been seen to pass the mansion again, and the servants could nowhere find her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PLEDGED JEWELS.

COLONEL BRANDT did not keep his pledge to gamble no more, notwithstanding the very many bitter lessons he had received.

He had intended to do so, as thoroughly as the drunkard intends to give up liquor when he "swears off" from the intoxicating cup; but, almost as surely he fell.

The lessons he had received had been bitter indeed, but each time he had gotten out of the scrape; and though he dreaded the peril, he yet hoped to escape the alternative of a bitter ending, and at the same time trusted to yet come out a heavy winner, which would repay him for his many losses.

He unfortunately for himself met some boon companions, and they led him to play, and he lost.

To save his honor with them, he collected the money due Irving, for the sale of the booty captured on the smuggler craft, and it was sunk in trying to redeem himself.

The captured yacht had been purchased by the Navy Department from Irving and this sum was paid to the colonel, and went the same way.

Then he grew desperate and descended to crime.

White-faced, trembling, anxious, sin haunted, he found his way into Rudolpho's one morning, bearing with him a morocco case, done up in paper.

Seeking an interview privately with the money-lender, he was ushered into an inner office, and began his business talk, without observing a man lying at full length upon a lounge, and in a corner.

That "business" was to borrow upon certain jewels a vast sum on one year's time, for which he was to pay a usurer's interest.

The money-lender's eyes fairly sparkled as he opened the case and beheld the array of wealth before him.

There were jeweled necklaces, bracelets, brooches, rings, ear-rings and other trinkets of value.

Colonel Brandt was stern, answering only such questions as he was forced to, and demanding that the case should be locked and he keep the key, while the money-lender stowed the treasure-box away in his safety-vault.

This was agreed to, the money was paid, and Colonel Brandt departed, once more saved from the immediate ruin that stared him in the face.

But oh! how saved? By "temporarily borrowing," as he expressed it to himself, his daughter's jewel case, which she had left exposed in her room.

As he departed from the shop, the man on the sofa arose lazily and asked:

"Senor, do you know that man?"

"Ah, captain, I had forgotten you were there."

"Yes, I know him."

"Who is he?"

"I cannot divulge my customers' secrets, captain, even to you."

"Well, this is a case where I am deeply interested, and I wish you to serve me."

"As how?"

"I want that case of jewels."

"That cannot be."

"How much do you consider the case and its contents worth?"

"A very large sum, captain."

"Well, whatever sum you name as its value, I will place double the amount in your hands as security, and I wish the case."

"I will not take one thing from it, but I only wish it for a purpose, to gain a certain end."

"That end you will not tell me?"

"Not just now; but if I do not bring it back, you will get double its value."

"But suppose the owner calls for it, as he may in a few days, for he is a very rich man, and this is only some sudden financial embarrassment, upon his part, that will soon blow over."

"Then I will protect you."

"But how?"

"Simply set a time to call for them and I will meet him here."

"All right, captain, I'll trust you, for I am confident that you have some deep game to play."

"Well, here are jewels to secure you," and Barton Keys, for he it was in his Spanish merchant disguise, threw down a bag of precious gems.

"Now, Rudolpho, I wish you to get me up in a different disguise, and one that it will be impossible for me to be known."

"All right, senor, what shall it be?"

"Well, I wish to play the gentleman, and—"

"You speak French?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, a waxed mustache, a change of color in hair, a face darkened by dyes, and a wholly different dress from what you were wont to wear, with an accent in your conversation, and glasses, will completely metamorphose you."

"I believe you, so get up my disguise, rig me up a wardrobe, and have it sent to the Maison St. Louis, where rooms shall be engaged for me, and I will come out as a distinguished Frenchman—say Monsieur Enrique Erricson, and my money will soon get me the entree to society here."

"Captain, you are a bold man and I admire you, and will help you play your daring game, whatever it is," was the remark of Senor Rudolpho, who of all things, admired pluck.

"Do so, and I will not forget you, Rudolpho; but now I must be off, for it is nearly time for that sweet little plotter to come."

"Yes, I expect her soon."

"And you have all ready to thwart her?"

"All, captain."

"Good! now I must be off, and don't forget to fix up the Monsieur Enrique Erricson, as soon as you have disposed of that little arch-plotter Madam Rita," and with a light laugh, Barton Keys took his departure from the money-lender's, leaving by a secret entrance upon another street, over the door of which was the sign of a modiste.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOPES.

THE scene again changes to the cabin of the pirate schooner, which still lies at anchor in her disguise, none of the honest craft about her believing that they are so near the famous Ghoul of the Sea.

It is night, and in his lonely state-room Bradford Carr sits in moody silence.

Manacles are about his wrists and ankles, and his every movement causes his chains to rattle dimly.

He has held some hope since the strange interview he held with Rita in the cabin, and he holds trust that the woman will not break faith with him.

But he has not seen her since to speak with her, though he has seen her pass his state-room door many times.

Suddenly he starts, for a key turns in the lock of his door.

All is dark within, but a lantern burns in the gangway and by its light he sees who his visitor is.

It was Rita, and she entered and closed the door behind her softly.

"I have come to see you, senor," she said.

"And I am glad, for I was thinking of you," he answered.

"And wondering if I had forgotten my promise?"

"Yes, senora."

"I have not, as you see; but I have had to work hard to carry out my ends."

"I feel that, if you intend to do all that you would," he said sadly.

"I do intend to do all, and I have made my arrangements, and you shall know just what they are."

"You are very kind to me, senora."

"No, I am kind to myself; but let me ask you if you have any money?"

"Very little, lady."

"Will you accept from me a sum in gold?"

"No, lady."

"You will need it after you are free, and though you marry an heiress, you will not wish to depend upon her."

"Let this be a secret between us, and accept what I wish to lend you, for you can take it as a loan if you wish, and repay me when in your power to do so."

"But we may never meet again, though you are very kind."

"Yes, when it is safe for you and for her, then will I let you know where to find me."

"You must take the money, for you cannot do without it."

"As frankly as you offer it, I will take it, lady, and promise to repay you when in my power so to do; but tell me, please, have you really determined to set me free?"

"I have not only determined to do so, but I have made all arrangements, and I will tell you of them."

"I will gladly listen, senora."

"Well, first, I decided that your best course was to escape by way of the river, going to the cities in the up-river country."

"To have you do this I secured a large barge, had it fitted up with every comfort and stores, and a full crew engaged for it."

"By sail and oar you can thus reach the towns above; and the barge is paid for, and also the men's wages."

"Oh, lady, how kind you have been to me!"

"To myself, you mean; but let me tell you that I went to see the lady you love."

"Miss Brandt?"

"Yes."

"You saw her?"

"I did."

"She is well, I hope?"

"Perfectly, but sad at heart."

"Alas! she believes me all that Barton Keys has made me appear before the world."

"You are mistaken."

"What! she does not believe that I am the Pirate Priest?"

"She does not, senor."

"God, I thank Thee!" moaned the prisoner in fervent tones.

"The world may believe it, but Miss Brandt does not, and neither does one other."

"And that other, lady?"

"Is your pupil that was."

"Brave Irving?"

"Yes."

"Heaven bless the boy!"

"Yes; he goes about proclaiming your innocence, and few dare speak of your guilt before him."

"I am happy to feel there are two that trust in me."

"Yes; it is a pleasant thought to know that some one feels for us and loves us."

"A pleasant thought indeed, lady; but tell me what said Miss Brandt, when you saw her?"

"I went to the mansion in my present disguise, and found her alone in the garden. I asked her, if it was proven that you were innocent, if she would marry you, and go far away with you until the hatred that now followed you both had burned itself out?"

"And her answer?"

"She said 'Gladly.' Then I told her I would

let her know soon just what was to be done, and to hold herself in readiness, for a priest shall be on hand to make you man and wife, and you can at once depart beyond expectation of pursuit."

"But I do not wish to force Miss Brandt into becoming my wife under such circumstances."

"She is willing; and only on such terms, that I see you married, shall you get free."

"I must have the written consent of Miss Brandt to this arrangement to feel that she will submit to such a marriage."

"She submits to save you and to save herself, for I happen to know that a sad fate awaits her—ay, and you, if you refuse."

"Lady, I accept, and am in your hands."

"And I rejoice," and Rita extended her hand, while she continued:

"Now live in full hope, for to-morrow night, or the next, you shall be free."

"God bless you, lady!" was the fervent response of the poor prisoner, while Rita said, as she opened the door:

"Do not thank me, or ask God's blessing upon me, for I act for my own selfish motives alone."

With this she departed, leaving Bradford Carr full of hope that the future was not all shadowed for him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

KIDNAPPED.

RUDOLPHO awaited patiently in his "sanctum" for a visitor.

He had given orders to his clerk to show that visitor in whenever she should call, for it was a woman that he was expecting.

After glancing at the old clock in one corner a score of times, the door opened and the visitor entered.

It was Rita, in her disguise of an old woman, and it was the day following her interview with Bradford Carr.

An hour before, her husband, in his disguise, had left the money-lender's, not intending to meet her there.

"I have been waiting for you, madam," said Rudolpho, handing Rita a chair.

She took it and said:

"I hope you have news for me."

"Yes, senora."

"Well, senor?"

"My spy has reported that the gentleman you bade me have watched has brought a small sloop out in the lake, getting a crew of several men for it, and intends to send it away to-night with a lady on board."

"A lady?" gasped Rita.

"Yes, senora!"

"Who is she?"

"An heiress, for whose return a large ransom will be paid."

"You know her name, senor?"

"The Senorita Brandt."

"Ah! it is as I expected; but does she go alone?"

"With the lugger men only, I believe, and they are to carry her to some island, and there keep her until the ransom is paid."

"Alas! it is no ransom that he is after; but Senor Rudolpho, you must aid me to thwart this scheme."

"Willingly, senora; but how?"

"Let me think; and you, too, try and aid me to a plan."

Rita, for a moment, was buried in deep thought, and then Rudolpho said:

"Senora, my spy discovered this by enlisting as one of the crew of the smack, and they are not paid such an extravagant sum, so that something might be done in that way."

"How mean you, senor?"

"A larger bribe might get them to serve you, instead of the one who employs them."

"Ah! I see; you mean that I shall bribe them not to carry the lady off?"

"Not exactly that, but to carry her off in the smack, run it around through the Rigoletts to the nearest point where the river can be reached, and cross the neck of land to where the barge can be waiting to go on up the river."

"Senor Rudolpho, your plan is a splendid one, for I will have the barge start to-night, and await for the coming of the smack by way of the lake; but the priest must be willing to go up on the barge."

"He will, senora."

"Then you will ask your spy to bribe the crew of the little vessel?"

"It would hardly come well from him, being one of them; but I have the direction here where you can find the little vessel, and if you were to go and see the men, I feel that you could accomplish all you desired; but pardon me if I say that you should change your present disguise."

"How know you that I am disguised, senor?"

"Ah, senora, I see much of men and women kind, and I penetrated the mask."

"You are young and beautiful, and not the old woman you pretend to be."

"But that is not my affair, so here is the place where you will find the smack at anchor, and you can go there and make your own terms with the crew," and he handed Rita a piece of paper with certain directions written upon it.

"But, when will the lady be kidnapped, senor?"

"To-night, and the plan is all arranged, and she will go innocently into the trap."

"I thank you, senor, and let me pay you for your services."

Rita then made a generous payment to the wily rascal, and took her departure, returning at once on board the schooner.

Here she took off her disguise, robed herself in a handsome dress, and looking grandly beautiful left the vessel.

Monk had already, at her command, ordered a carriage for her, and just at twilight she went ashore.

Reaching the vehicle she gave the driver directions where to drive and sprung in, throwing herself back upon the cushions in deep thought.

She was both happy and sad, for she was happy that her plan to get Maud away from Barton Keys was going to be successful, and sad that her husband had so deceived her.

But, with Maud out of the way, and the wife of Bradford Carr, the strange woman would be more than willing to forgive the inhuman wretch whom he had married.

Thus she thought, as the vehicle rolled rapidly out of the city along the Lake road, now the magnificent "Shell road," the pride of the New Orleans people.

At length the carriage drew up not far from an humble cabin, in which burned a dim light.

"There is the place, lady," said the driver.

"Ask if one Norcross is here," replied Rita.

The driver knocked and the door was opened by a woman, who, in answer to the question, said that Norcross was on board the smack, lying at anchor a cable's length off-shore.

"Hail, and he will send a boat ashore," added the woman.

The driver drove down to the beach and hailed.

A boat at once put off from the smack and soon landed.

But one man was in it, and in answer to Rita's question about Norcross, said that he was on board the smack.

"Row me out to the craft, then, my man," was the response, and in a short while after she stepped on board.

"Enter the cabin, lady," said the man.

This Rita did, to find herself in the clutches of two men, one of whom pressed his hard hand over her mouth to prevent an outcry, while the other said:

"Well, lads, this is luck, for ther leddy hes come out to us, without our hunting her up."

Resistance was vain, and Rita was soon not only securely bound hands and feet, but her mouth was bandaged to prevent her crying for help.

"Send the carriage off, Dick, and hand the fellow a couple of double eagles to believe what you tell him."

The man addressed rowed ashore, and approaching the driver, said:

"The lady says she's found her beau, so will not go back with you to the city, and sends you these as a souvenir."

"You see, it's a runaway match."

"Ah! that is it," said the driver, and finding golden eagles where he had expected silver dollars, he said:

"Luck to her, for she's as generous as a gambler, and that's saying heaps, for card men pays well for what's done for 'em."

"So I has heerd; but good-night, lad, and a safe voyage back to town," answered the sailor, as he sprung into his boat and sculled rapidly back to the smack.

As the boat was swung up to the stern davits, the smack began to move through the water, and a few moments after was dashing swiftly along over the waters of Lake Borgne, with poor Rita caught in her own trap, a prisoner in the cabin, and being borne she knew not where.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A VILLAIN'S WORK.

"WELL, captain, all went off splendidly," said Rudolpho, as Barton Keys entered his shop the day after the kidnapping, going in by the private entrance on the other street.

"Yes, your plan worked well, Rudolpho, and by this time the smack has landed Rita on the island, and has gone to negotiate with her old father for ransom."

"You think he will pay well?"

"Indeed, he will, for she is the idol of his heart, and that is the reason I do not get rid of her in a way that would forever end her spying upon me; but, were she dead, the old Sea Owl would cling to his riches, and I know he has vast wealth, while as it is, my wife will get it all."

"It is a good plan to keep her on then, captain; but she will not be illy dealt with, and in a week or so will be with her father, to await your coming, while you can have things your own way here."

"Yes, and I assume my disguise as Monsieur Erricson to day, so set your wits to work to get me up in the best manner possible."

"Are there any packet-ships coming in now?"

"Several, senor, from Havana, Vera Cruz, Jamaica, New York and Portland."

"Well, Monsieur Erricson must arrive by one of these and drive at once, bag and baggage to the Maison St. Denis."

"Yes, captain, your luggage is all ready for you, and shall be sent at once to the hotel, with instructions that you will soon follow, having stopped on the way to see your banker."

"This is good; but now send off the baggage, then order a vehicle for me at the time you think you can metamorphose me, and leave the rest in my hands."

The money-lender dispatched his clerk to attend to certain duties, and then adjourning to an upper room with Barton Keys, he set to work to change him into another person in appearance, if not in character.

Rudolpho was certainly a cunning villain, and master of his art, for, after several hours, Barton Keys, under his skillful hands, was so changed as to be wholly unrecognizable to himself.

His hair had been dyed from its golden hue to an intense black, his mustache had been added to and also changed color, while the ends were waxed like a French drum-major's!

Then the skin had been darkened to the tint almost of a Mexican's.

His dress was not the *neglige* style for which he had been noted as a planter, but fashionable and gorgeous in the extreme, with gold eye-glasses to hide his eyes, while his broad shoulders had been, by the cut of his coat, padded up into a shape that altered his form greatly.

When thus attired, and with eye-glasses and cane, a smirk on his face, and an affected manner, the mother of Barton Keys would never have known him.

Glancing for the first time at himself in a mirror, after this remarkable change, the pirate was fairly startled by the metamorphosis, and cried earnestly:

"Rudolpho, you are the most accomplished villain I ever knew!"

"It takes a villain to know a villain, captain," was the cool response.

"I guess you are right, Rudolpho," answered Keys, with no show of anger; and then he added:

"Why, it will take me some time to get accustomed to my own appearance."

"Well, captain, push matters, for as long as you remain here there is danger; and you are keeping your crew cramped up, and some one might prove traitor, you know."

"True; and I shall lose no time, I assure you, and have already started to work in a quiet way—for, Senor Rudolpho, I have a grand scheme on hand," and Barton Keys smiled significantly.

The carriage was now at the door, and after a few more words to Rudolpho, the pretended Monsieur Enrique Erricson took his departure and was driven to the Maison St. Louis, where it soon became noised abroad that a distinguished and immensely wealthy foreigner had taken up his quarters.

In a few days, as had been his intention, Barton Keys, the Spider, caught poor Colonel Brandt, the Fly, in his web, and then coolly told him that he had in his possession the jewel-case of Maud and its contents.

Having lost a large sum to the supposed Frenchman, and with him holding suspended above his head the secret of the jewels, Colonel Brandt was wholly in his power, and when the master commanded that he should present him at his house to meet his beautiful daughter, the slave was compelled to obey—and thus far the "grand scheme" of the pirate worked well, and it was working to in the end make Maud Brandt the victim of his hatred and revenge, as poor Bradford Carr then was languishing in chains on the schooner, watching, waiting and hoping for the coming of Rita, and the keeping of the pledge she had made him.

But the days passed on and she came not, and to the prisoner's inquiries regarding her, Monk, the one he asked, gave only the answer:

"Missus Rita, sah, hab mysterious disappeared, an' we fears she am dead."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GOLD VERSUS PROMISES.

THE reader has doubtless solved the mystery of Rita's being kidnapped as she was, and that her husband was at the bottom of it, having employed the ever-willing Rudolpho to do the work.

The story told Rita, that Maud Brandt was to be kidnapped, was not true, for Barton Keys had already decided upon another course of action to get her into his clutches, and the crew of the smack were men in the employ of Rudolpho, who had played their part so well that the poor captive really thought that she had been mistaken for the heiress she supposed they were waiting for.

As soon as the smack got under way, Rita was freed of the bandage over her mouth, and her bonds, and allowed to remain free in the cabin, or to go on deck.

She chose the latter, and glancing around her beheld five men on board the little vessel.

The craft was a sloop, of perhaps twenty

tons, had been fitted up evidently for the purpose of carrying off Rita, and was a good sailor.

The five men on deck were a rough-looking set, one of them sitting at the tiller, and the other four improving their time forward by gambling, with the aid of a lantern set on the deck.

The latter paid no attention to Rita, but the helmsman offered her a seat, which she accepted.

"Why am I taken off this way, my man?" she asked.

"Dunno, lady."

"Who is your leader in this affair?"

"Dunno."

"Do you know that you have made a mistake?"

"How, lady?"

"You have not run off with the right one!"

"You is the one we was to go with, I guesses."

"No, it was Miss Brandt."

"And who is you, lady?"

"I am the wife of the man who employed you."

"I guesses not, lady."

"I am, and, knowing your mistake, as I do, I will pay you a handsome sum to put back and land me."

"Can't do it, lady."

Rita felt worried and anxious, for, contrary to her usual custom, she had come away without either a large sum of money, or the jewels she generally carried with her, having expected to place in Bradford Carr's hand the gold she wished him to have.

A couple of hundred dollars was all she had with her, and she felt that she could only give promises to pay, if the men would obey her.

"If I only had my gold, or my jewels, then I could put this craft about very quickly," she said to herself.

But she determined to do all in her power to see what she could accomplish without, and said:

"My man, you work for money, do you not?"

"Yes, missus."

"You take the highest pay you can get?"

"Sart'in."

"How much do you get for this night's work?"

"It hain't only a night's work, for it may last a couple o' weeks, and maybe longer."

"But where are you taking me?"

"To a little island, one of the Chandeleurs, lady."

"For what purpose?"

"To keep you there until you are paid for."

"Who is to pay for me?"

"Dunno."

"Do you get the pay?"

"I gets my share."

"How much is your share?"

"The job pays me about five hundred clean."

"And your messmates?"

"They git the same."

"Well, I will double the amount if you will put back and land me."

"You don't mean it, lady?"

"I do."

"You'll give me a thousand?"

"Yes."

"And the lads?"

"Each one shall have the same amount."

"Just show me the gilt, lady, and we are the boys."

"My man, I am sorry to say that I have only a few hundred dollars with me; but if you will yourself return with me, I will give you the sum I said."

"Lady, gold is gold, and promises is promises."

"We have got a good bonus down for our work, and more is waiting for us when it is done, so we can't give up the gilt for promises, lady."

Rita sighed, and bit her lips with vexation, when she thought that at almost any other time she had had with her a small fortune, if not in gold, in precious stones.

"And you intend to carry me to an island, you say?"

"Yes, lady."

"And leave me there until a ransom is paid for my return?"

"Yes, lady."

"Here is fifty dollars to tell me the name of your chief in this matter?"

The man pocketed the bank-notes, and answered, coolly:

"His name is captain, lady, and that is all we knows him by."

"Tis is paying dear for very little information, my man; but I'll trouble you no more with questions," and Rita turned away and glanced out over the waters, her heart aching at the failure of all her plans, and wild with jealousy at the thought that she had left her husband behind her, with both Maud Brandt and Bradford Carr wholly at his mercy, and that he would be merciless she well knew.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE MASKED LOVER.

The island to which the little smack was bound, was duly reached without storm or accident.

It was a lonely spot, though there was a good harborage for a small vessel, and a cabin on shore,

which the crew made habitable in a very short while, and comfortable with the things taken from the craft.

The cabin was given to Rita as her home, during her stay on the island, while the men stayed on board the smack at night.

Rita had expected to see the little vessel sail away, after leaving her, but on the contrary it dropped its heaviest anchor and furled sails as though for some little stay there.

She was given ample to eat, and one of the men proved to be a good cook and served her meals for her in good style, so that she was at least in no danger of starvation.

But her heart ached, and she was utterly wretched, and daily promised the men almost fabulous sums to take her away, until they began to fear her mind was wandering at her captivity.

Thus several days passed away, and one morning early she was aroused from sleep by the cry of—

"Sail ho!"

Quickly she arose and dressed herself, and going out of the cabin sighted a small coasting schooner heading in for the island and about two leagues distant.

The schooner was a fast sailer and came on under all sail.

What brought it to her, hope or despair, she wondered.

As for the men they stood on the shore watching its coming and apparently feeling no anxiety regarding her.

At the peak floated a yellow flag of huge proportions, in the center of which was embroidered a scarlet eye, and this strange emblem the crew of the smack had doubtless recognized as a signal, or colors they knew.

Straight for the island the schooner came, rounding a sunken reef here, and a ragged point there, in a way that showed the man at the helm knew the channel into the harbor.

An hour passed and then the schooner ran into the little haven, luffed up sharp and let fall an anchor.

Soon a boat was lowered from the davits, and two oarsmen and a coxswain came ashore.

The latter spoke to the crew of the smack, and then approaching the spot where Rita stood, raised his tarpaulin and said politely:

"Lady, my captain bids you come out to the schooner, if it is your pleasure."

"His command will have to be my pleasure," answered Rita, with sarcasm, and then she asked:

"Who is your captain, sir?"

"That he will tell you, lady."

Rita made no reply and followed him to the boat. He gave her a cushioned seat in the stern, and soon after aided her over the schooner's side.

The vessel was unarmed and had a small crew, scarcely half a dozen men only being upon her decks.

"Your captain is not here to receive me," said Rita, with surprise.

"You will find him in the cabin, lady."

This meant evidently that her escort would go no further, and she advanced alone toward the companionway entrance.

There she hesitated.

Was it her husband that she was to meet, who, believing that the crew of the smack had kidnapped Maud Brandt, had come there in a strange vessel after her?

Nerving herself to meet the man, she descended the few steps into the cabin, and started, as a tall man with a masked face confronted her.

"Be seated, fair Queen of the Smugglers," and the man spoke in a rich voice and motioned Rita to a chair.

Without response she took the seat and turned her brilliant eyes full upon the man before her, trying to pierce the mask he wore.

But so completely was his face hidden by the mask that not a feature was visible, while his hair was also concealed from view by a fancy cap, and gloves covered his hands, leaving nothing by which to identify him, had Rita met him before.

He was certainly not her husband, as his form plainly showed.

But who then could he be?

That question she could not answer, so she sat in silence, awaiting for him to address her.

"Lady, I hope you have suffered only kindness at the hands of my crew?" he said.

"You are then their captain?"

"Yes, lady."

"They treated me with respect, but not kindness, when they tore me from those I love."

"Lady, they but obeyed my commands, and I have sought you here to offer you pardon."

"Which I shall gladly accept."

"But it is conditional, fair lady."

"Of course you wish ransom, sir?"

"I wish more, I long for your love."

"My love, sir?" she said, indignantly.

"Yes, sweet Rita, I love you, and I have come to beg you to be mine," he said, earnestly.

"Senor, I am a wife."

"The wife of a pirate."

"Pirate, yes; but I love him with all my heart."

"He does not love you."

"That may be, still I love him."

"There is another upon whom his affection is cast."

"Alas! I know that but too well."

"Then why not fly with one who idolizes you, sweet Rita, one who will devote his life to making you happy?"

"Senor, you insult me, because I am powerless to protect myself."

"Though I am a Smuggler Queen, though men call me their Lady Captain, and though my husband is an outlaw, a pirate, whose hands are stained with many a crime, I am yet a woman of honor, and a true wife!"

Rita had risen to her feet, and spoke with emotion and dignity, that made her only more beautiful; and the man asked her earnestly:

"Rita, is this your decision against me?"

"It is, sir."

"I can never expect mercy from you?"

"No more than I need expect mercy at your hands," she said, with a look of contempt.

"But, Rita, suppose your husband were to die, would you then—"

"No, sir, no! I will not listen to such a thought, or further speak to one who attempts to win a woman's love with a face he dare not show."

The man stood in silence a moment, and then said:

"Well, lady, as I have your answer and cannot get your love, after all the expense and trouble I have been to to win it, I must have your gold."

"Ah! you drop quickly from sentiment to sordidness; but I have no gold with me."

"There is one that will ransom you."

"My husband, whom you say does not love me?"

"Oh, no."

"Who then?"

"The Sea Owl!"

"Ah! my father?"

"Yes, Lady Captain, your father."

"He will indeed pay a large sum to ransom me from this cruel captivity."

"I will then get from him the very highest sum that he will pay for the Lady Captain of the Smugglers of the Rigoletts, and when the ransom is paid, you will be free."

"Now, as I have business that calls me away, I will have to ask you to return to the island."

"With pleasure, sir!" and bowing with mock politeness, and with a contemptuous smile upon her face, Rita left the vessel, which, after the master of the smack had gone on board and had a talk with the masked captain, raised anchor and set sail from the island, and some hours after disappearing from the sight of the lonely woman, who watched it with a heart that was full to bursting.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LADY CAPTAIN'S RANSOM.

"LADY, we has orders to leave yer fer a day or so," said the smack's skipper, Norcross, as the schooner with its masked captain disappeared from sight.

"You have orders to leave me here?"

"Yes, lady."

"Surely not alone?"

"Yes, lady."

"And where do you go?"

"To hunt your ransom."

"You know where to go?"

"Yes, lady."

"Where?"

"To the Sea Owl."

"You know where to find him?"

"In the Owl's Nest Basin."

"Yes, but do you know the channel, sir?"

"I has been there."

"And what ransom does the man ask for me?"

"You means the captain?"

"Yes, the man who fears to show his face."

The skipper looked a little puzzled, hesitated about replying, and then said:

"He wants a cool twenty thousand."

"He will get it."

"It is big money."

"Not for a Smuggler Queen," said Rita with a sneer.

Then she asked:

"Do you expect my father to pay you the money before he gets possession of me?"

"Oh, no, lady, the captain is no fool."

"How will you manage it then?"

"I'll get it all right, lady, and the Sea Owl will get his daughter; but I hain't at liberty to say just how."

"Well, if I must be left alone, the sooner the better," and Rita turned away, while the skipper descended to the beach where his companions awaited him.

"Well, she's a cool one, lads, and no mistake; but we must be getting off, for darkness will be on us, before long, and the wind is fair for us to reach the Owl's Nest by dawn."

In a little while the smack stood out of the harbor, just as the sun was setting, and standing alone upon the island Rita watched her until she disappeared in the gloom of night.

After a night run of it the little craft ran into the lagoon leading to the Owl's Nest Basin just as the sun was rising.

But hardly had she gone a dozen cable-lengths up the bayou, when impassable barriers appeared before her, in the shape of heavy logs choking the way.

"We anchors here, lads," said Norcross.

"Smack ahoy!" at the same time came in trumpet tones from an unseen lookout:

"Ahoy it is! we want to see the Sea Owl," shouted Norcross.

"Who is it that wishes to see the Owl Chief?" asked the voice.

"I bring a message from the Lady Captain," called out Norcross.

"I will speak with the Sea Owl," answered the lookout, and some distance up the lagoon a small boat was seen to pull up the stream and disappear.

"Lads, the old Owl is careful, you may be sure, for these logs is fixed so they blocks up the lagoon in no time, and opens for a vessel to go through," said the skipper.

After waiting half an hour, the skiff was seen returning, and in it was the lookout, while behind it came a large boat with a dozen men.

Approaching the upper end of the log raft, the barge ran alongside, and the Sea Owl sprung out.

"Ho the smack!" he shouted, in a voice that rang through the forest that lined the lagoon banks.

"Ay, ay, captain," answered the skipper.

"Do you wish to speak with me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave your craft and meet me half-way upon the raft."

"I'll do it," answered Norcross, and leaving the craft he proceeded to pick his way over the logs, meeting the Sea Owl about half-way.

"Well, sir?" sternly said the Sea Owl.

"Captain, your daughter is in trouble."

"What trouble?" and Captain Ristel turned pale with dread.

"She got kidnapped, sir."

"Where was her husband?"

"I hain't posted about that, captain; but she got picked up."

"By whom?"

"One as wants gold to let her go."

"Where is she?"

"Safe."

"That means you must have money to tell?"
 "Yes, captain."
 "She will be given up on ransom?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "What sum?"
 "Twenty thousand."
 "If it was ten times that sum I would give it."
 "Better give me a little gilt extra, for not saying it was more, captain."
 "I'll give you lead or steel, fellow, if harm of any kind has befallen my child," and the look and tone of the Sea Owl checked the aspirations of the skipper for any little fee on his own part.
 "What are your conditions?" asked the Sea Owl.
 "You are to give me an order on your agent in the city, to pay the sum demanded."
 "Well, sir?"
 "I am to start at once in the smack with two of my men, to collect the order, and as soon as we have been gone ten hours, then two more of my men will go with you in your own vessel to pilot you to the spot where you will find your daughter."
 "I will agree to these terms upon two conditions."
 "Well, captain?"
 "First, that you send a man with my order, and you remain as my pilot; and second, that you shall be put to death if my daughter is not found where you say."
 "I don't know that I could trust one of my crew with so big an order, captain."
 "You will have to."
 "And it's hard to have to die, if accident should take your daughter away; but I am so certain she is there, I'll agree."
 "All right, I'll go to my lugger and write the order and return here."
 With this the Sea Owl left the raft, going in the lookout's boat, and leaving his crew to guard the smack.

Reaching his lugger he called out to the Indian, who was lying upon the deck:

"Chincopin, go on board the Sea Owl lugger and ask Lieutenant Argyle to come here at once."

The Indian sprang into his canoe and paddled up the Basin to where the lugger lay at anchor, having only returned the day before from her voyage to take Rita to her husband.

Entering his cabin the Sea Owl wrote an order upon his agent, the Senor Rudolpho, to pay to the bearer the sum of twenty thousand dollars.

By this time Argyle, whom the reader now knows as Chester Granger, came on board the Home Lugger.

"Well, Argyle, I am anxious to have you take the Indian with you, and he will pilot you by the lagoon chain to the open water some leagues from here."

"Once there, watch for a small smack with patched sail, keep her in sight and at night overhaul and capture her, bringing her back here to await my coming."

The young officer at once departed, and the Sea Owl returned to the raft.

"I have here the order—read, and see that it is all right," and he handed it to Norcross.

"It's got the owl on it, captain, and your name, with the amount, while it is on your agent, and so I say it's all right."

"Then select the man you wish to give it to, and let your vessel start."

This was done, and when the smack had departed Norcross and his companion were blindfolded and taken in the barge up to the lugger.

After the time asked by Norcross had elapsed, the Sea Owl went on board of the lugger which had taken Rita to Pensacola after the Don's yacht, and once out of the lagoon the skipper acted as pilot and headed for the island where the Smuggler Queen had been left in her lonely solitude.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DESERTED ISLE.

WHEN the lugger of the Sea Owl reached open water, and Norcross took the helm, Captain Restel swept the watery horizon with his glass.

Afar down the coast he caught sight of a tiny sail which he knew to be his own lugger, the Sea Owl, and he smiled grimly as he muttered:

"Argyle is in the smack's wake, so I need have no fear for my money."

"Now to see what this fellow will do, and woe be unto him if he gives me not my child."

So on swept the lugger, sailing with the wind free and making good time, while Norcross stood at the helm and anxiously glancing at the stern face of the smuggler chief.

By the side of the helmsman stood the messmate who had accompanied him, and Norcross said in a low tone:

"If the gal has gotten heart-lonesome, like wimmins sometimes gits, and gone and drowned herself, then it are all up with us."

These sentiments seemed to be fully concurred in by the man, whose face also wore an anxious look.

Night came on before the lugger had gone many leagues, and not wishing to arrive at the island until dawn, sail was shortened and the watch placed.

Just as the sun arose the lugger ran into the channel leading into the harbor, and soon after let fall an anchor, and lowered a boat.

If the face of the Sea Owl looked pale now, those of Norcross and his messmate were livid, for nowhere could Rita be seen.

The cabin-door was open, and though the Sea Owl had loudly hailed as the lugger ran in, no response had come, nor was the Lady Captain visible.

"Is this where you left my child?" asked the Sea Owl.

"It is, captain."

"Then where is she?"

"She must still be asleep in the cabin, captain," answered Norcross nervously.

Straight to the cabin they went; but it was vacant.

There were indications that it had been occupied, but the occupant was nowhere visible.

Over the island the crew of the lugger scattered, excepting the men, left as a guard over Norcross and his companion, who were now most thoroughly alarmed.

But one by one the men returned to the starting-point, and reported that, after a most thorough search of every part of the island, no trace of the missing one could be found.

"You promised to give me my child," roared the

Sea Owl, turning furiously upon the men who had brought him there.

"We left her here, captain, indeed we did, sir," whined Norcross, while his comrade cried:

"We did, sir, we did."

"Where is she now?"

"Heaven only knows, sir."

"You are liars, for base as you are, you would hardly have the heart to leave a young girl here on this island alone."

"No, you got my money, or an order for it, and hoped I would think it was all right, that some vessel had taken her off, or that she had escaped, and then allow you two wretches to go free."

"But no, you shall both die, for such was my compact, and in making a victim of my child, you have roused the devil in my nature."

"Mercy, captain! for the love of God mercy!" cried the two trembling wretches.

"Give me my child, will you?"

"I cannot, oh, I cannot."

"Would to God we could," whined the culprits.

"Ho on the lugger, there!" shouted the Sea Owl to the men left on board.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Rig two rope ends for these devils, and lose no time about it," was the stern order.

"Ay, ay, sir," came back the response.

"Mercy! mercy!" shrieked the two doomed men. But they appealed to ears that were merciless, and the order was given to bind them and bear them on board the lugger.

This was quickly done, and struggling, shrinking, praying, Norcross and his companion had the noose placed about their necks, and, at a signal from the Sea Owl were dragged up into mid-air, while the stern-faced father of the missing woman stood looking on in grim silence, the expression upon his dark face showing how dearly he enjoyed the revenge he was visiting upon those whom he believed had robbed him of his daughter.

With the two bodies still dangling from the rigging, the lugger was gotten under way, and once out into open water headed back to the Owls' Nest Basin.

CHAPTER XLII.

ADRIET IN A STORM.

THE reader has seen enough of the nature of Rita, the Lady Captain, to know that she was not one to wilt under adverse circumstances, but to fight to the front with all the strength of character which she possessed.

She certainly had heaped upon her enough to break down a strong man, in seeing her plans swept to naught in the seeming moment of triumph.

Whatever the motive that prompted her, she certainly meant to release Bradford Carr, and see him again with the one being he loved.

To this end she had spent her money freely, and it had failed; but not only failed, for this she would have borne with equanimity, but she herself taken off as a prisoner.

Where she had nearly always carried a fortune with her, she now found herself with only a few dollars, so to purchase her freedom was impossible.

Added to this, the prisoner on the Sea Ghoul was pining and watching, waiting and praying for her promise to be fulfilled, and her husband was left in New Orleans with the very being that Rita wished to keep him away from.

Again, alone upon an island she had been left by her captors, while they had sailed away to rob her loving father of a large ransom for her.

With thoughts that burned with rage, and a heart that ached with sorrow, she stood watching the departure of the smack, and tears welled up into her beautiful eyes.

But, dashing them away impatiently, she said, savagely:

"I will act for myself."

How she was to do this she did not know; but her steps led her to the cabin.

This she eyed attentively for a long time, and then her gaze fell upon an ax, and a coil of rope.

"Ha! the cabin will make a raft, and there is the material I need to cut it up and lash it together."

"I will do it."

But the cabin timbers were heavy, and she knew it would be a giant task for her, yet her courage did not fail her.

Then the smack was still in sight, and she must not attract their attention to her acts.

So she strolled away, going along the beach, until she reached a point of the island which she had never been to before.

There, upon the point, was a dark object, which she could not see distinctly in the gathering gloom.

But she surmised what it was, and with a cry of joy she rushed to it.

"A boat! a boat! and it has drifted here to save me!" she fairly shrieked.

Quickly she looked into the boat, and started back with an exclamation of horror, for it held an occupant.

An occupant, yes, but one whose life had passed away forever.

Emaciated, starved, the poor man had died in the boat, with no compass, sail or oar to guide him to safety, and perhaps no strength to aid him had he had them.

Closely Rita examined the boat and found it sound, though half full of water from the seas breaking over it.

There was no oar, mast or sail in it, only the dead man, and an anchor attached to the painter.

Throwing the anchor out to keep the boat from drifting, Rita returned through the darkness to the cabin, having determined upon her course.

She hoped to find something at the cabin she could put to good use, and her search discovered a long oar that would serve as a mast, and a short one which would act in the place of a rudder.

Some small pieces of canvas she at once set to work to make into a sail, and it was late at night when she had all ready to start, for she had piled up to take with her all she needed to make her comfortable and subsist on.

After a few hours' sleep she arose at dawn, and carried her mast and sail to the boat, with something to bail it out.

This she did, leaving the dead man on one of the seats.

Then she made different pilgrimages to the cabin, and returning with loads each time, was soon in readiness to depart.

A light wind was blowing out toward the Gulf, and the tide was running out; but she determined to start, so stepped her mast, raised her little sail, and departed from the island.

Once clear of it, she lowered the body of the dead man tenderly into the sea, and saw him sink from sight.

Then she endeavored to shape her course for the haunt of the Sea Owl.

But the wind and tide were both against her, her oar made an indifferent rudder, and her sail did not set well for beating to windward, and she found that she was making leeway, rather than headway.

Thus the hours went by, and when the sun set the island was barely in sight, and she was adrift and alone in an open boat.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WHAT THE LUGGER PICKED UP.

WITH his Indian pilot on board, Chester Granger found no difficulty in towing his boat through the various bayous that run together like a net, and reaching the open water leagues beyond.

His glance seaward showed the little smack dashing away at a great rate, nine miles off the land and making for Lake Borgne.

After she had passed he set sail and went in chase. She had fully six miles' start of him, but he at once began to gain, and did not doubt but that he would run her down before night.

Those on the smack seemed to feel that they were being pursued, so put on all sail to get away.

"I tell you, messmates, that lugger is after us, and even at this long distance, I can see that she is a flyer, so the Blossom has got to leg it her best," said the man to whom Norcross had given the order, addressing his two companions.

"She does be coming on, messmate, and we must not tarry," answered one, and every particle of sail that the smack could put up was spread to catch the breeze.

Then her sails were wet, and her helmsman watched every point to get the chance to make all be could out of the wind and sea.

"What do you think she is?" asked one.

"Maybe a government cutter, and maybe not."

"Yes, she may be a smuggler, too."

"Well we is honest, and they could do nothing with us, messmates."

"No, but if they got the order?" asked one.

"Say, messmates, don't you think we ought to do something for ourselves?" asked the helmsman.

"As how?"

"I has an order here for twenty thousand clean."

"Yes," eagerly said his companions.

"And why hain't it as good for us, as for him?"

"The captain?"

"Yes."

"Waal it is, I reckon."

"So I say."

"Then let us get the gilt and ship with it in our pockets for another part of the country?"

"You are level headed, messmate."

"You are, indeed."

"Then it is agreed so?"

"Yes."

"And I say yes."

"Then the money is ours."

This decided they remained silent a few moments, having forgotten the lugger in their greed for gold.

"The lugger!" suddenly cried the helmsman glancing astern, while he was building air castles for the future.

And no wonder was it that he cried out in alarm, for the lugger had shaken out her sails and was coming on like a race-horse, overhauling the smack in a manner that showed she would bring her to within the hour.

"Oh, messmates! our gilt is gone, I fear," moaned the helmsman; and the three, knowing that nothing more could be done for the smack's speed, settled down in gloomy silence to await the end.

That the lugger carried guns they could see, but trusting in her speed seemed not to care to use them, and ran alongside of the smack, with the stern order:

"Lay that craft to!"

This order was promptly obeyed, and Chester Granger and the Indian boarded.

"Well, men, which way?"

"To Orleans, captain."

"What are you?"

"A honest fisherman."

"Don't lie; for I was sent after you by your skipper, whom you left with the Sea Owl."

"He says that other arrangements have been made for the ransom of the Lady Captain, and you are to give me the order."

This was terrible stroke for the three rascals, but the order was at once produced and handed over.

"Thank you; but now to let me send your smack back to the Owl's Nest by some of my men, while you go with me after the Lady Captain."

"If I get her, then you and your comrades are to go free and have your ransom."

"But we does not know where—"

"Hol' on, sir! Don't lie to me, for I'll throw you overboard, with a tow-line, and make you swim to where you have left the Lady Captain."

This stern threat of Chester Granger settled it, and the men said that they would pilot the lugger to the island; so they went on board, while Chincopin and one of the crew took the smack to run it to the basin.

It was now dark, and the craft was put under easy sail, and headed for the isle where Rita had been left.

But she had a head-wind, and toward morning a storm swept over that part of the sea, and she stood boldly out into the Gulf to weather it.

When day broke it was blooming fresh, and she was yet leagues away from the island, but heading toward it.

But suddenly the lookout sung out:

"Boat, ho!"

"Ay, ay, I see it; and it looks like a ship's yawl under a spritsail!" cried Chester Granger, as he turned his glass upon the boat.

"They are signaling us. It is doubtless some one whose vessel was wrecked last night in the storm, and they had to take to their boats."

"Bear away for the boat, helmsman." In half an hour more it could be seen by those on the lugger that there was but one occupant in the boat.

Turning his glass again upon it, Chester Granger thrilled his crew with the cry

"Lively, lads, lively! for that boat contains our Lady Captain!"

It was true, and a wild yell broke from the smuggler crew as they beheld Rita stand up in the boat and wave to them.

A few moments more and she was on the deck of the Sea Owl, which at once changed her course and headed for the Smugglers' Retreat.

Without adventure the fleet craft ran into the lagoon, the log raft was opened, and it passed through into the basin, where the smack had already arrived, and Chincopin made his report to the Sea Owl upon his return.

"I will wait three days, and then if Argyll does not return with my child, or news of her, *I will find her, and those who have harmed her*," he had said.

But the next day the lugger arrived with the Lady Captain on board, and the old Sea Owl, in his joy at her return and gratitude to his young lieutenant, said:

"Argyll, you have proven yourself so true, I wish you to take the fleet out to meet the incoming ships, now due, and get their booty."

"You may have to wait weeks, but they will come, and I will remain here and rest, while the Lady Rita will keep me company as in the olden time."

After putting the little smuggler fleet in perfect repair, Chester Granger set sail in the Sea Owl, and, followed by the others, started for the various rendezvous where the vessels that smuggled in goods were to be met, and the packages of costly merchandise transferred to the holds of the little white-winged law-breakers.

As for Rita, not believing that she could find her husband in New Orleans, and utterly broken down, she determined to remain at the retreat and bide her time, to see what the future would bring forth.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE WARNING.

AFTER a long absence from New Orleans, I must ask my kind reader to again accompany me thither, that we may pick up the thread of our narrative, and see what is transpiring with the other characters of this romance.

In spite of the watchfulness of Irving Brandt, upon his father's action, the unfortunate gambler planter had again and again been lured to play, until once more he had gone so far beyond his depth that despair and death rose up before him in all their hideous forms.

But he hid, as well as he could the canker gnawing at his heart, and deceived both his son and daughter for a long time as to the true state of affairs.

The theft of the jewels belonging to Maud had not been publicly known, and to the great joy of the maiden, for the sake of the heirlooms and loved memories among them, they had been found and brought to her by no less a personage than Monsieur Enrique Erricon, who stated that the colonel having told him of their loss, he had constituted himself a detective, and traced the thief to his den.

As for this same pretended Frenchman, he had become a toast about town, and his vast wealth, which he squandered with lavish hand, made him a lion among men, and an object of adoration with designing parents with marriageable daughters.

Seated one day in his elegant rooms at the Maison St. Louis, the pretended Enrique Erricon was surprised by a messenger who bore a sealed letter.

It read:

"SANCTUM.

"Danger ahead. Come at once to

"R—."

The pirate understood it but too well, and answered:

"Say to the writer I will come at once."

Half an hour after he entered the sanctum of Rudolpho.

That worthy was impatiently awaiting him, and said quickly:

"I am glad you have come, for you are needed."

"What is it, Rudolpho?" coolly asked the pirate.

"All is up with you."

The pirate turned white, but in a firm voice, asked:

"Have I been betrayed?"

"No, for I alone know Enrique Erricon and the Pirate Priest as the same."

"Any news of Rita?"

"None."

"Then what is the matter?"

"Your vessel is known to be in port!"

"Ah!"

"Yes, as I feared, by your keeping the men cramped up beneath decks so long, some one has made his escape and reported all."

"Well?"

"It is not well: for she is to be seized at midnight."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, so you will have to get away as soon as it is dark."

"I shall not go."

"What?"

"I do not intend to leave the city."

"Do you mean it?"

"Every word of it."

"You will be captured."

"Not I."

"What devilry are you up to now, captain?" asked the surprised money-lender.

"Just this; I shall not leave the city, now that I have success within my grasp."

"You will be hanged."

"Not I."

"You have worked out some daring plot?"

"Yes, and intend to carry it out."

"Can I aid you?"

"Certainly."

"I am wholly at your service."

"Well, tell Dupont, my lieutenant, to sail in the schooner, as soon as it is dark, and run her to the retreat of the Sea Owl, where I will join her when I can, and I shall have to ask you to get me a lake-craft to hold in readiness to take me there."

"I will do it, senor."

"By the way, there is none better than that boy's yacht, the Lady Maud, so simply have me a crew ready to take her when I need her."

"Why not bring some of your own crew ashore and keep them at a sailors' inn in readiness, for you know you can rely upon them?"

"The very idea, and you can tell Dupont to pick me twenty good men, and you look after them when ashore."

"I will; but about yourself, captain?"

"I will tell you all about myself, and to begin with, Monsieur Enrique Erricon is to marry the belle, beauty and heiress, Maud Brandt," and the pirate laughed triumphantly.

"No! is it fixed?"

"Yes."

"But how?"

"Oh! I had the hold on the old colonel about the jewels, you know, and then he owes me largely in gambling debts, so I had him for my interceder, and as she cannot marry without her father's consent, and she knows that he is in my power, she quietly submits to her fate."

"But about your wife?"

"As to Rita, she must grin and bear it, and if she is troublesome, she must go the way of all flesh."

"To the grave?"

"Yes, or to a resting-place under the blue waters."

"Give her to me."

"Win her then, if you can."

"Egad! I tried that; but she loves you so thoroughly she scorned me, after I had taken great pains and gone to much expense to win her."

"You see, I thought I would be doing you a favor, captain, to get her off of your hands."

"You were; but you surely did not allow her to suspect the part I played in her abduction?"

"Oh, no; trust me for that, for though I made love to her, it was under a mask, and she did not know who I was."

"All right; take her if you can get her."

"It will save my taking her life, which, as she saved mine, I do not care to, unless she forces me to it."

"You seem to hate the beautiful woman."

"Oh, no; I simply do not love her; but I must be off, for I have an engagement to dine at old Brandt's; but let me know if my schooner gets off all right."

"I will, captain," answered the money-lender, and Barton Keys took his departure.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE SEA FOX SETS SAIL.

THERE was no man in the city of New Orleans who was more busy than Captain Palafox, the Sea Fox, during the scenes narrated of the deviltries of Barton Keys and his ally in sin, Rudolpho, the money-lender.

Having discarded the Black Flag, Captain Palafox was determined that he would do all in his power to drive the sable ensign from the high seas, and he devoted his whole energies first to hunting down Barton Keys.

He had followed his disguised vessel up to the city, and had his spies at work in an endeavor to find her; but the pirate was too well disguised as a lumber craft to be detected very easily, and days and weeks passed without discovery, and she still lay at her moorings.

Finding that his spies had done nothing, Captain Palafox determined to act for himself, and in various disguises visited the sailor inns, the levee, and as a fruit-peddler went on board every craft in the river.

At last his search was rewarded by the discovery of the pirate, and he determined to take his crew and seize her that night, believing that her pirate captain would then be on board, and he would then capture all.

But one of his crew let the secret out unintentionally, and in this way it reached the ears of Rudolpho, through his spies, and, as the reader is aware, Barton Keys learned the fact.

Upon the same afternoon Captain Palafox received word from Irving Brandt of an important nature, and at once he went out to the lake-shore, and boarded the youth's yacht.

He found Irving in conversation with a seaman, who had just brought him tidings from the Smuggler King, Sea Owl.

It was Leon, the smuggler traitor, who had only that morning arrived in a sea canoe from the Owl's Nest Basin to make his report, according to his promise to Irving Brandt.

"Well, Master Irving, I have news for you," said Captain Palafox, as he entered the cabin of the Lady Maud.

"And I have news for you, captain," was the boy planter's response.

"Good! so we'll hear yours first, as this man seems anxious to tell what he knows."

"Tell the captain, my man, just what you have made known to me," said Irving.

"Well, sir, as I have been one of 'em, I know the workings of the Sea Owl's gang, and they have certain times for sending out the little fleet after smuggled goods."

"The fleet meet the different vessels coming in, get their bales of booty from on board of them at night, and then return to the Basin, where the Sea Owl and the Lady Captain go over the goods, divide the cargoes as they want them, and send them off again in the luggers, one to New Orleans, another to Mobile, a third to Pensacola, and so on, as the Smuggler King sees fit."

"Now the fleet has been gone some time, under a new lieutenant the Lady Captain picked up, and word came that they would be in soon, so I was sent down to be on the lookout for them; but having enlisted with the young captain here, I came to make my report."

"What force has the Sea Owl?" asked the Sea Fox.

"At the Basin, on his own lugger, himself, daughter, a negro and a negress, and one Indian; but they would all fight like tigers."

"Call them five."

"Yes, sir; but there is a guard at the mouth of the lagoon of two more."

"Seven."

"Then on the Sea Owl lugger, under the lieutenant, there are four men, the other lugger has five, and the smack has four."

"Thirteen and seven; twenty in all," coolly said the captain.

"Yes, sir; but then there is a sentinel cruiser, as we call her, that carries half a dozen or more men."

"Her duty is to keep watch, to warn the Sea Owl of danger, and report incoming vessels, and she might run in with the others."

"All right, I hope she will, so you can make a clean sweep of it, Master Irving."

"You will go with me, captain?"

"You have to sail to-night?"

"Yes, sir."

"I cannot, for I have other game to run down, and it must be done to-night, so I cannot spare you any of my crew, and you will have to go to the navy commandant and get a detail of men; so return with me."

"And can I go, too, sir?" asked Leon.

Irving was about to answer in the affirmative, but Captain Palafox said quickly:

"No, sir; for you are too slippery a fellow to trust, and are now betraying your comrades simply for gold, and would sell Master Irving if you got a higher offer."

"No; you go into irons, and if you do your duty, as you seem inclined to do—you will be well paid and get a pardon, when you should be hanged."

With this Leon was forced to be satisfied, and he was at once sent down into the hold in irons, and left under guard of the negro crew; while Irving accompanied Captain Palafox back to the city.

But shortly after dark, the Boy Planter returned; and with him were a number of gallant tars, under command of a couple of dashing middies, thirsting for fame, and anxious to serve with so gallant a young captain as Irving Brant had proven himself to be.

Releasing Leon from his irons, Irving ordered the anchor up and sail set, and the pretty Lady Maud glided away upon her mission of danger.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE DEVIL FISH AND THE SEA GHOUL.

"Up with that anchor, lads, for we must get out of this, as our lumber hide has been discovered to carry bull-dogs below."

The order came from Dupont, the reckless pirate lieutenant of the Sea Ghoul.

The crew knew that discovery meant death to them, and the anchor was now up and sail set.

It was a dark, rainy night, and the vessels in the river were tugging at their anchors, the sound of the clanking cables breaking the stillness that rested upon all.

Past craft after craft, with the wind fresh, the disguised schooner glided on her way.

"They are alive on board of that craft," said the pirate officer to his helmsman, as they passed near a schooner on which forms were visible moving about, while a boat was seen coming off from the shore loaded with men.

"Yes, lieutenant, they are up to some mischief, and maybe we are their game, for I have noticed that craft before, when I was on shore, and if she isn't under false rig and colors, as we are, I am very much mistaken," said a quartermaster.

"Well, if we are her game, she will have to follow us to sea, and if she knows what is good for her, she had better not do that, for we are larger and heavier handed and gunned than she is," replied Dupont, and then he turned to an under officer, and ordered:

"Have all ready, Hobart, to throw this lumber into the sea in a hurry, and to get the guns on deck, for as we have got claws I wish to be able to scratch with them."

Swiftly down the river the pirate vessel held its course, and having run out into the Gulf, Dupont cast aside all disguise and dressed the craft up in her true colors.

And there was need of it, for in her wake, shortly after she struck blue water, came bowling along the very craft which had been noticed at anchor the night before, when they passed her and beheld men busy on her decks.

She too was casting aside an honest disguise, and coming out in her true colors with armed decks and a large crew.

"By Heaven! but we did not get off a minute too soon, for we are that fellow's game," cried Dupont, with his glass leveled at the stranger.

"He means business, sir," said Hobart.

"He does, and sails like the wind, and I verily believe it is the Sea Fox."

"Then we should have no dread of him, sir."

"Not if he was a square out-and-out pirate, which he is not, for he is more than friendly with our foes; but at any rate, if he drives us, we will teach him a lesson."

"But he is gaining, that is certain, and we must crowd the canvas on the Ghoul."

This was done, but the stranger did likewise and still gained.

"There go his colors, sir!" cried Hobart.

"Yes, he sets the American flag, but the dress don't make the man, Hobart."

"Stall I run up our stripes, sir?"

"No, don't notice his flirting. Wait until he is in earnest."

After a little while, as the Sea Ghoul paid no attention to the United States flag, the stranger hauled it down and up went the Spanish ensign in its stead.

"I told you he was flirting with us, Hobart."

"Shall I answer, sir?"

"No, he has not shown his true colors yet; but I wish the Pirate Priest was on board, for he knows the Devil Fish well, and could readily tell if yonder craft was the Schooner of the Sea Fox."

"Why did the Padre Captain not come with us, sir?"

"For the same reason that you and I, and every other man has made mistakes, sir, being fools to fall in love."

"Ah!"

"Yes, the Padre loves, and loving a woman is therefore a fool, and he will get a rope about his neck instead of her arms, if he is not careful."

"I was a fool once myself, Hobart, and that is why I am here."

"And so was I, sir; but down comes the Spanish flag, sir, as you see."

"Yes, and what next?"

In answer came the cry from half a dozen voices:

"It is the Devil Fish!"

"Yes, it is Palafox's schooner, the Devil Fish, for see all know his flag," and all eyes were now turned

upon the strange flag visible upon the schooner, and which was a sable field with a red fox in the center, and one paw resting upon a grinning white skull.

"Now, Hobart, let him see just who we are, now that he shows his hand," ordered Dupont, and up over the deck of the Sea Ghoul floated the cross and cutlass flag.

Hardly had the strange ensign caught the wind, when, to the surprise of all on board the Sea Ghoul, there came a puff of smoke from the bows of the Devil Fish, and a solid shot went flying over their heads.

"Ha! he believes in dog eat dog, does he?"

"Well, we will have to accommodate the Fox."

"To your guns, men! and if he crowds us, the result be on his head," cried Dupont.

The men ran quickly to quarters; but again came a shot from the Devil Fish, and better aimed than the last it went tearing along the deck, cutting a man down here and there and doing other damage.

"At those stern-guns there! return that fire and make it tell!" shouted Dupont.

But, hardly had the two stern-guns sent forth their iron missiles, when the Devil Fish luffed up sharp and poured a broadside upon the Sea Ghoul.

The damage that followed was great, for a top-mast came down on deck, the bowsprit was shot away, a gun was dismounted, and a number of men dropped at their posts.

Before the wreck could be cleared away, and the Sea Ghoul got round to meet her foe, a second broadside came thundering down upon her, and under cover of the smoke of her guns, the Devil Fish rushed to close quarters.

"Boarders to repel boarders!" shouted Dupont, realizing how desperate was his situation, and his crew rallied about him.

But over upon his decks swarmed an irresistible mass of humanity, led by the Sea Fox himself, and driving the pirates before them, they cut them down mercilessly, until Dupont falling mortally wounded, and their other officers having been slain, they cried for quarters.

As soon as he could check his maddened men Captain Palafox did so, and then, to his deep chagrin, he discovered that the man he sought above all others was not with his vessel, but back in the city.

Instantly he gave orders for the prisoners to be secured and damages repaired, after which the two vessels put back for the port they had sailed from the night before, the Sea Fox rejoicing at his signal victory, and vowing to yet capture the Pirate Priest.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AFTER LONG WAITING.

WHEN Captain Palafox set sail for New Orleans, with his prize, he went on board the Sea Ghoul himself, to discover just what he had captured.

He had placed guards over all below decks, so that nothing would be disturbed, and descending into the sumptuous cabin, when the two vessels had fairly started on their way back to the city, he glanced around him at the magnificence upon all sides.

There was booty scattered about of all descriptions, and vast quantities of wealth, gained from the capture of many a richly-laden vessel.

Certain it was that the Sea Ghoul had never expected his vessel to fall into the hands of an enemy.

Opening the treasure-chest, with the aid of an ax, Captain Palafox sat down to count over its contents, when to his surprise there came in manly tones the hail:

"Hol without there!"

"Ay, ay, sir; who calls?" cried the Sea Fox, springing to his feet.

"A prisoner of the Sea Ghoul?" came the answer.

"Ha! that is it, is it? Well, you shall no longer be such, for I am now master here," and Captain Palafox went toward the state-room door from whence had come the hail.

It was locked, but was soon dashed in.

There stood the prisoner, ironed hands and feet, and awaiting release.

Pale, haggard and worn he looked; but the fire of an untamed soul shone in his handsome eyes.

"Bradford Carr, by all that's holy!" fairly shouted the Sea Fox, as he sprung forward and grasped the hand of the prisoner.

"Yes, I am Bradford Carr, or what that accursed fiend has left of me," was the sad response.

"God knows I have wronged you, as have all others but two persons, for you have been believed to be the Pirate Priest, commander of this schooner."

"In my inmost heart I humbly crave your pardon, Mr. Carr," cried the Sea Fox.

"It is granted, Captain Palafox, for it is no wonder that I have been so considered, when Barton Keys has devoted his life to the task of proving me such."

"Barton Keys?"

"Yes."

"The man who so wronged you before, and then escaped from jail and was considered drowned?"

"The same."

"And he is captain of this vessel?"

"Yes."

"By Heaven, but this is glad news; but let me look up the keys to unlock these irons," and Captain Palafox hastily returned to the cabin, and after an absence of a few minutes came back with the keys.

"Now, sir, you are free."

But the poor prisoner could not walk without aid, and was half-borne to an easy seat in the cabin, when he said:

"So you are the gallant captor of this craft, Captain?"

"Yes."

"Yet she was stronger than you in both size, men and guns."

"True, but her crew was much smaller than I expected."

"I deemed it a Government vessel that had attacked her."

"In part it is, Mr. Carr, for I have seen the evil of my ways, and giving up the career of a free rover, have taken to pirate-hunting, and this capture will get a pardon for myself and crew."

"I am delighted to hear this; but can you tell me aught of Colonel Brandt and his family?"

"All that you care to know, sir, for I saw Master Irving only yesterday, and he has gone now to attack the Smuggler King, known as the Sea Owl, in

his den, and my word for it that he will render a good account of himself."

"There is no doubt of that, sir; but what of Miss Brandt?"

"She is well, sir; but her father is the slave of cards, and has so insinuated himself that he is in the hands of a man whom I deem a designing villain; but who is lionized by the aristocrats as a distinguished foreigner."

"And has he forced Colonel Brandt to again sacrifice his poor daughter?" cried Bradford Carr, eagerly.

"It is about that, sir, or would be if she married the Frenchman—"

"A Frenchman, you say?" eagerly asked Carr.

"Yes, sir, by name Enrique Erricon."

"Great God! Captain Palafox, describe him!" cried Bradford Carr.

"A tall man with waxed mustache, sloping shoulders, and—"

"Captain Palafox, that man is Barton Keys in disguise, for he has twice visited me here in this schooner of late, and I felt that he was up to some deep game."

The Sea Fox sprung to his feet as though an adder had stung him, and cried:

"Bravo, Carr! the secret is discovered, and now I solve the mysterious resemblance in the man which I could not trace."

"He is none other than Barton Keys."

"Ho, on deck there!"

"Ay, ay, sir," answered an officer down the companionway.

"Crowd every rag on this schooner she will bear, and signal the Devil Fish to do the same."

The order was obeyed, and the two fleet schooners went flying toward the Balize, while in the cabin of the Sea Ghoul, Captain Palafox learned all that had passed on the pirate vessel since the tutor had been kidnapped that night at the Brandt Plantation, while in turn Bradford Carr heard what had transpired on shore and among those he cared for.

By dawn the two schooners dropped anchor in front of the city, and while the news of the capture of the Sea Ghoul was spreading like wildfire through the town, Colonel Brandt was entertaining at breakfast no less personages than Captain Palafox and Bradford Carr, and with the happy Maud, was listening to the strange story they had to tell.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE BATTLE IN THE OWL'S NEST.

RITA, the Lady Captain, and her father, the Sea Owl, sat together in the cabin of the Home Luger.

They were expecting the little smuggler fleet to run in at any moment, and were discussing what booty it would bring.

Rita was also most anxious for its return, as she had heard no tidings from New Orleans, and consequently nothing from her pirate husband, about whom she was becoming most anxious.

Could he have been so foolhardy as to keep his vessel all that time anchored off the city?

Had he set sail, and if so, had he carried with him Maud Brandt?

This uncertainty almost drove her wild, and she had made up her mind to go in the Sea Owl lugger to New Orleans and see for herself just what had happened.

Chester Granger could land her on the lake-shore at night, and from there she could readily reach the city, and the suspense would be over.

Had Barton Keys taken Maud with him, Rita dreaded to think what she would do, for loving her husband as she did, she yet knew that she would become revengeful toward him, had he cast her aside.

It was her nature and she could not help it.

Suddenly the Indian entered the cabin and reported that the fleet was coming up the lagoon.

In half an hour more the lugger, the watch-boat and the little smack—captured from the crew of Rudolpho, and all of whom the Sea Owl had hanged for running off with his daughter—came into the Basin and dropped anchor.

"Where is the lugger-yacht?" asked the Sea Owl.

"Captain Granger put his booty on the watch-lugger, sir, and sailed in chase of a trim little craft out of Mobile," was the answer.

The rich cargoes were then transferred to the Home Luger, in boats, for the smuggled freight was not of a bulky nature, and the tired sailors turned in for the night, while the Sea Owl and his daughter still chatted together in the cabin, Rita having determined not to await the coming of the yacht, but to start in the morning in the watch-lugger.

"I dread to have you go, my child, for somehow I have a foreboding of evil," said the Sea Owl.

"I hope your fears will not be realized, father."

"I hope so, Rita; but I am strangely nervous to-night, and somehow wish you would not leave me—hark!"

Both listened attentively an instant, and then sprung to their feet in alarm, for there came a sudden shock, and then a ringing voice shouting:

"Follow me, lads! for this is the Old Owl's nest!"

In dismay the Smuggler King sprung forward and grasping a cutlass rushed on deck to defend his life and booty, while Rita armed herself and followed as quickly as she could.

But, in the few minutes she had delayed disaster and death had come, for the lugger was in the hands of a victorious crew, and her father was engaged in a cutlass encounter with one she knew but too well.

It was Irving Brandt, and at his back were his gallant slaves; while the other vessels of the smuggler fleet had also been boarded by boats filled with United States seamen, and a fierce conflict was going on.

Rushing forward then and there, Rita would have slain Irving, for she had her pistol leveled; but Woods, the negro mate of the Lady Maud, struck up the weapon and seized her in his strong arms just as the Sea Owl gave the youth a slight wound, his attention having been momentarily attracted by the enraged cry of the Lady Captain.

Maddened by the wound, Irving, who was a superb swordsman for his years, sprung at the Sea Owl like a young tiger, and striking down the smuggler's

guard, laid him dead upon the deck with one vicious sweep of his blade.

A wild cry broke from the lips of the Lady Captain at seeing her father fall, and again she made an effort to kill the Boy Planter; but once more Woods interfered, and received a slight wound in protecting his young master.

Foiled by the act of the negro, Rita threw herself upon the body of her father and in a voice that was hoarse with passion, cried:

"Father! my poor dead murdered father! before high heaven, and above thy dead body, I vow to avenge you!"

Swooning away from her emotion she was borne into the cabin, and when she once more gained consciousness, the little fleet was at sea, sailing swiftly along on its way to New Orleans, by way of the Mississippi river, Irving Brandt having made a most successful fight, and capturing all but the swift sailing Sea Owl, then absent under Chester Granger.

In good time the fleet ran up the river to an anchorage off the navy quarters, and Irving turned his prisoners and prizes over to the naval commandant, who was enthusiastic in his admiration of the young sailor commander, and said warmly:

"My boy, the capture of the Sea Ghoul by Captain Palafox, has gained for him a pardon, and my word for it that your gallant work gains you a middy's berth in Uncle Sam's Navy."

"How glad would I be, sir, to be thus honored," proudly answered the youth, and the commandant rejoined:

"Well, you shall be, for this very night I write to the Navy Department and claim it for you."

With a happy heart Irving then went to his home, and the greeting he received there from his father and sister, and his meeting with his old tutor, now proven not to be the Pirate Priest, and to whom he had been true through all, filled his cup of joy to overflowing, and he said to himself:

"Myrtle will be as happy as I am, when she knows what I have done, and that I am to be a midshipman in the navy."

Then he added:

"I must now go on board the Lady Maud again, and release that poor woman, as I promised I would, and whom I had not the heart to give up as a prisoner, so said nothing to the naval commandant about her."

The Lady Maud had been run up the river and anchored opposite to the mansion where Colonel Brandt dwelt, and it being dark, Irving sprung into a skiff alone and rowed out to her.

Locked in a state-room, where he had left her, he found Rita, stern, white-faced and vicious.

"Lady, I told you that I did not wage war against you, so have come to set you free."

"I will put you on shore, where my carriage awaits to drive you into the city, and as only my negro crew know that you were captured on your lugger, they will not tell on me, and you can go your way in peace."

"Boy, there is no peace between you and I," she said, savagely.

"As you please, lady; but I do not fear you, so set you free."

"Have you any money, may I ask?"

"Yes; and all I have I will devote to avenging my father."

"I hope you will not attempt to do anything so foolish; but come, for I am ready to escort you to the carriage."

She followed him in silence, and refusing his proffered aid, sprung into the boat, and was soon after being driven rapidly into the city.

As she dismounted from the vehicle, at the inn where she had hidden the negro coachman to set her down, a man, panting breathlessly, ran up to her side.

"Chincopin!" she cried, with joy.

"Yes, me Indian Chincopin—me jump over when fight done, save old niggers, get away in skiff."

"Then come here by lake, wait for boats, and see Lady Captain land."

"Then Chincopin follow quick, tell Lady Captain Sea Owl lugger in lagoon out at lake and wait for her."

"Thank Heaven! and is Lieutenant Argyle there?"

"Him there."

"Then I shall get my revenge."

"Come, Chincopin, let us get a carriage and drive at once to the lake," and an hour after the revengeful woman was in the cabin of the Sea Owl, which had picked up the Indian and negroes in their skiff, and she was pouring into the ears of Chester Granger the story of her sorrows.

"Now, senor, I devote my life to a sacred duty, that of revenge; but let me first find my husband, who is in the city without a vessel, and he will aid me in the good work, I know," and, while the Sea Owl lay in hiding in the lagoon, the Lady Captain returned to the city to discover some trace of her pirate husband.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE DARING OF DESPERATION.

"WELL, captain, what do you think now?" asked Rudolpho, as Barton Keys, still in his disguise as Monsieur Enrique Erricon, came into the money-lender's sanctum the morning after the coming of Irving Brandt into port with the smuggler fleet.

"How mean you, Senor Rudolpho?" asked Barton Keys in the most ordinary manner.

"Well, you are a cool one, and no mistake, captain, for I expected to see you flying like a hunted deer after all that has happened."

"Oh, I am Monsieur Enrique Erricon, and have nothing to do with pirates and smugglers," laughed the reckless man.

"And you still hang to the hope of winning the fair Lady Maud?"

"Of winning her, no; but of getting her into my power, yes."

"And why not?"

"Her lover has been found on board of your ship, you know, and every man in the city is on the search for you."

"What do I care for that?"

"I intend to kidnap the fair Maud, and there is no vessel in the world that I like better than the Devil Fish, the schooner that overhauled my own Sea Ghoul."

"She is unhurt, in perfect condition, and lies at anchor in the river."

"Fortunately I left twenty men of my crew ashore, and they will do as a nest-egg to get more in, and you must get me eighty more as good tars as ever cut a throat or scuttled a ship."

"I can do it; but you are getting a heavy crew."

"I do not intend to fly light any more, and I shall arm the schooner with heavier guns."

"I tell you, Rudolpho, there is no need of a man giving up simply because he is down in the world and the odds against him."

"But you lost your treasure on the schooner, and—"

"There you are mistaken."

"I lost a great deal, but I have right here more than they got."

"See! I make it a rule not to go broke," and the pirate, with a laugh, threw down a small bag of jewels before the astonished money-lender.

This brightened his face, for he felt that he was serving a man who still had money to pay with, and he said:

"With that large fortune, why do you seek that of the Lady Maud?"

"Bah! what care I for her fortune? It is revenge I want."

"I see; and you intend to kidnap her?"

"Yes, and more, for I shall kidnap her lover too, and thus get my revenge after all."

"You are a remarkable man, captain."

"I hope to prove myself such, before I am done with life, and I shall dare all that a desperate man dare do."

"But I must be off, for Monsieur Enrique Errison has an engagement with Colonel Brandt to dine, and he never misses a chance to make a good impression."

"Good-by, Rudolpho, and go to work to get me the crew at once."

"I will, captain."

"And here, Rudolpho, if you want security, take these on deposit, for I have another bag of them," and he handed Rudolpho the little bag of jewels.

"You know just what is here, captain?"

"To a stone; yes, and their exact value."

"All right; I will keep them for you, as it is a large sum for a man to carry with him."

"That often helps him to get out of a scrape."

"But give me a receipt for them please."

Rudolpho looked over the gems, and made out the required receipt.

Then the pirate at once went to his hotel, made his toilet as perfect as possible, and drove to the residence of Colonel Brandt, who told him he was anxious to have him meet some friends who were then in the library.

"Willingly, Colonel Brandt, for your friends are my friends," was the smiling response, and the unsuspecting man walked into the trap laid for him, and a moment after found himself in irons, and the prisoner of the Sea Owl, who had at last insnared him.

CHAPTER L.

CONCLUSION.

The captain of the famous pirate Sea Ghoul, and who was proven to be the Pirate Priest, Barton Keys, and also Enrique Errison, shook the city to its very center, and the greatest excitement prevailed.

Taken at once to the city prison for safe-keeping, it was decided some weeks after to remove him on board of an American cruiser for trial and execution, and he was driven from the jail in the charge of two officers, who rode in the vehicle with him, while he was also securely ironed.

But half an hour after the vehicle was found upon the levee, the driver dead upon his box and no one inside.

In some mysterious way Barton Keys had been befriended at the last moment, and thus made his escape.

In vain was the city searched for him, for nowhere could he be found; but some time after it was reported that he was the commander of an outlaw craft that was doing much damage in the Gulf to shipping, and which carried a flag with a black field and in the center a huge red owl.

Some said also that a woman was the commander of the Sea Owl rover, but what was the truth regarding the strange vessel no one seemed really to know.

As for Rita, the Lady Captain, she too disappeared from view, and her fate, like Barton Keys's remained a mystery.

With the Sea Ghoul schooner captured and Barton Keys bereft of his power, Colonel Brandt removed once more to Brandt Plantation, accompanied by his daughter and her husband, Bradford Carr, for the two lovers were made one before leaving the city, and thither Myrtle also went with them, while her father Captain Palafox got a position as a Coast Patrol to prevent smuggling.

Irving Brandt, the boy planter, entered the navy and became known as the Planter Midshipman, and his adventures made him famous along the entire Gulf coast and enrolled his name upon the pages of history.

THE END.

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